

Commentary

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The debate: evolution vs. creationism

BY DAVID LEIDNER AND PAUL RINZLER | BY SCOTT KOHLBUSH

There's no other side to evolution

Atheists United San Luis Obispo applauds the Lucia Mar Unified School District for pledging to ensure that their teachers understand that creationism and intelligent design are not allowed in science classes. We would like to explain why this policy is just as much in the interest of the religious as the non-religious.

After learning that their son was allegedly being taught creationism in science class, the parents of an Arroyo Grande High School student wrote an email to the teacher, asking him to stop. The teacher responded by saying: "I feel it would be a disservice to my students not to present both sides of the argument." This prompted letters from Atheists United San Luis Obispo and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, which got administrators to take notice.

In explaining the teacher's actions, Assistant Superintendent Tom Fiorentino told the media: "It was the right intent; it was the wrong action," and, "based on my investigation, it was just a way to motivate those 11th-graders into discussion." *The Tribune* also weighed in, stating "Sorry, but there is no dispensation for teachers who feel it's their duty [to] present both sides of the debate. ... Teaching religious dogma in science class is prohibited—period."

We very much appreciate the support and swift actions of our community to get creationism out of science classes, but we also feel compelled to point out that the justifications for doing so hint of the insidious misconception that there is a scientific controversy about evolution. There is not, and perpetuating this myth only undermines our children's understanding of the scientific method.

The overwhelming majority of the scientific community endorses evolution and rejects creationism and its dressed-up child, intelligent design (ID). A 2015 Pew Research Center poll puts this number at 98 percent. Our federal courts came to the same conclusion in 2005. In the case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, the Discovery Institute, supporting intelligent design (ID), and the National Center for Science Education, supporting evolution, brought out their best experts for an exhaustive evaluation of the evidence. This is what the judge, John E. Jones III, a Republican appointed by President George W. Bush, concluded:

“Not a single expert witness over the course of the six week trial identified one major scientific association, society or organization that endorsed ID as science,” and, “The overwhelming evidence at trial established that ID is a religious view, a mere re-labeling of creationism, and not a scientific theory.”

The crux of the issue is that creationism/ID does not rely on the scientific method. The National Academy of Sciences puts it this way:

“Creationism, intelligent design, and other claims of supernatural intervention in the origin of life or of species are not science because they are not testable by the methods of science. These claims subordinate observed data to statements based on authority, revelation, or religious belief. Documentation offered in support of these claims is typically limited to the special publications of their advocates. These publications do not offer hypotheses subject to change in light of new data, new interpretations, or demonstration of error. This contrasts with science, where any hypothesis or theory always remains subject to the possibility of rejection or modification in the light of new knowledge.”

This is not a secular viewpoint, it is a scientific one, and many religious people and organizations share it. The Roman Catholic Church, the American Jewish Congress, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran World Federation, the Rabbinical Council of America, the United Methodist Church, and the Unitarian Universalist Association have all publicly endorsed evolution. Francis Collins, the head of the National Institutes of Health, a noted geneticist, and also an evangelical Christian, calls evolution “unquestionably correct” and rejects ID. And more than 13,000 American clergy members have signed the Clergy Letter Project letter endorsing evolution and rejecting ID. The letter eloquently justified why believers should be just as much against creationism/ID as non-believers:

“We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as ‘one theory among others’ is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God’s good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator.”

If creationism/ID was a scientific theory, then by all means, it should be taught in a science class. But it is not science, and teaching it in science class only confuses students about how real science works. We owe it to our students to do better than that.

David Leidner and Paul Rinzler are Atheists United San Luis Obispo board members.

Evolution and creationism could be taught side by side

I am writing in response to a letter from the Freedom From Religious Foundation (FFRF) and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS). The letter was written at the behest of Atheists United SLO and the family of a student at Arroyo Grande High School (AGHS). It was addressed to Jim Hogeboom, superintendent of the Lucia Mar Unified School

District, and urges the investigation of Brandon Pettenger, a science teacher at AGHS who the letter accuses of “inserting his personal religious beliefs into the public school classroom.” The letter has received attention in the local press and was circulated on the Internet. I write as a concerned citizen and as a parent of a Central Coast New Tech High School student as well as two recent graduates of AGHS.

It is indeed ironic that Atheists United SLO, which promotes itself as a “freethought” organization would lead a campaign to stifle classroom debate and limit academic inquiry. Yet in the letter written by RDFRS and FFRF, they say:

“Any attempt to teach that there is a controversy about evolution is similarly fraught with legal peril. Evolution is as much a fact as gravity. There are not two sides of the evolution argument for Pettenger to present. Teaching a controversy about evolution is like teaching about the controversy that exists between chemistry and alchemy, or astronomy and astrology, or voodoo and medicine. There exists only scientific fact and evidence, and a religious belief that rebels against such evidence. One can, indeed must, be taught in public schools. The other cannot.

“We request that you investigate this matter immediately. If these allegations are founded, Pettenger must be directed to refrain from promoting religion or attacking evolution in the public school. Courts have upheld the dismissal of teachers in cases like this. At the very least, appropriate disciplinary action should be taken, and the results of your investigation placed in the teacher’s file. Please promptly inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to protect the rights of your students.”

Threatening schools with legal action and good teachers with dismissal amounts to intimidation and bullying. It’s downright intolerant. The fact that these organizations continue to publicize the issue even after AGHS handled it internally reveals their true motives. They want to silence anyone else who might have the audacity to question their evolutionary dogma as well. Their strategy is censorship by intimidation.

The National Center for Science Education defines dogma as “a system of beliefs that is not subject to scientific test and refutation.” When an organization claims that “evolution is as much a fact as gravity” or that people must “refrain from attacking evolution in public school” they are treating the theory of biological evolution as if it is infallible dogma that is above critique or refutation. It is not, and should not be treated as such. Don’t be deceived by these organizations’ blustery rhetoric. There are reputable scholars who raise legitimate questions about evolution. If you are so inclined, I suggest reading David Bentley Hart’s essay lampooning evolutionary biologist Daniel Dennett or maybe *The Devil’s Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* by mathematician David Berlinski, which explores the limits of science and the hubris of militant atheists like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins.

The letter in question also sites multiple court cases involving the teaching of evolution and creationism in public schools. One case that they failed to cite is that of *Segraves v. California*. In this case from 1981, the court found that the California State Board of Education’s anti-dogmatism policy should emphasize that scientific explanations focus on “how” and that any statements concerning ultimate causes, should be presented conditionally, not dogmatically. That

ruling applies to ardent evolutionists as well as die-hard creationists. Many questions concerning the origins of life are ultimately metaphysical in nature and beyond what the material science can investigate. No parent wants the state, some church, or Atheists United dictating what their children should or should not believe about human existence and the meaning of life.

There is a renewed emphasis at the high school level to produce students who are “college and career ready.” Perhaps high schools should look to Princeton University and the University of Chicago for direction. The faculties of both schools recently adopted principles of academic freedom. These principles include the right to dissent, the freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas, and the idea that individuals should not be shielded from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. One would think that Atheists United, of all organizations, would agree with these principles. Perhaps evolution and creationism belong in the same classroom after all.

Scott Kohlbush is a concerned parent with a student at Central Coast New Tech High School.