

Science, Religion, and the Teaching of Evolution in Public School Science Classes

The National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy

What is the relationship between religion and science? This has emerged as a dominant question in our society, particularly in the context of the teaching of evolution and Intelligent Design. People of faith, especially those involved in public education, may find themselves challenged by those who would use this question to polarize communities. Often today we hear about the teaching of evolution in public schools framed as though it were a debate between people of faith and people of no faith. This short resource seeks to assist people of faith who experience no conflict between science and their faith and who embrace science as one way of appreciating the beauty and complexity of God's creation.

Theology puts into words our rational and prayerful reflections on revelation. A theology of creation presents the Church's thinking about the relationship between God and the world as it is informed by our understandings of Holy Scripture and observations of nature. It seeks to express in human language the mysteries of this relationship. It is not a theory about the universe but a doctrine about the God who creates it. —Episcopal Church Catechism of Creation

What is science?

Science is the study of the material, processes, and forces of the natural world. Science is not about belief; it is about how things work. One cannot "believe" in science or "believe" in evolution. Science is about the exploration of natural causes to explain natural phenomena. Science is empirical, which means that questions of truth are established through experimenting and testing. There are no absolutes in science; all issues are open to retesting and reconsideration.

What is religion?

Religion is about belief, meaning, and purpose. According to the Episcopal Church, the stories of creation in Genesis "should not be understood as historical and scientific accounts of origins but as proclamations of basic theological truths about creation. 'Creation' in Holy Scriptures refers to and describes the relationship between God and all God's wonderful works." Religious truths are evaluated by an appeal to authority, by contextualization in history, by their philosophical coherence, even by their psychological and emotional resonance with life and experience.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. —Hebrews 11:1

Is it possible to think that both religion and science are important?

Of course. Many people would say that religion and science are separate categories of learning. The evolutionary biologist, and historian of science, Stephen Jay Gould, described them as "nonoverlapping magisteria." The judge in a recent Dover, Pennsylvania court decision that affirmed the teaching of evolution in science classes criticized what he believes is a "contrived dualism" that pits science against religion. He wrote, "In deliberately omitting theological or 'ultimate' explanations for the existence or characteristics of the natural world, science does not consider issues of 'meaning' and 'purpose' in the world. While supernatural explanations may be important and have merit, they are not part of science." Many well informed and well educated people believe that the learnings of science and religion enrich each other.

In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own world view. —Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama

How is religious liberty, as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, relevant to a discussion about the teaching of evolution in public school science classes?

The First Amendment protects the citizens of the United States from the government's using public funds or institutions like public schools to endorse or establish any particular religious tradition. The first clause of the First Amendment (referred to as the Establishment Clause) protects against the government's "establishment" of religion, and the second clause guarantees our people the right to practice whatever religion they choose: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

It was in the context of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause that the December 2005 court decision in Dover, Pennsylvania addressed the issue of the teaching in public school science classes of Intelligent Design (ID), a conjecture that the natural world is so intricate that its creatures cannot have evolved, but must instead have been purposefully designed. The judge concluded that, because ID constitutes the teaching of religious belief under the guise of science, instruction about ID or any other form of creationism in public school science classes is unconstitutional under the First Amendment.

In the court decision, the judge wrote: "The Board's ID Policy violates the Establishment Clause. In making this determination, we have addressed the seminal question of whether ID is science. We have concluded that it is not, and moreover that ID cannot uncouple itself from its creationist, and thus religious antecedents. Both Defendants and many of the leading proponents of ID make a bedrock assumption which is utterly false. Their presupposition is that evolutionary theory is antithetical to a belief in the existence of a supreme being and to religion in general. Repeatedly in this trial, Plaintiffs' scientific experts testified that the theory of evolution represents good science, is overwhelmingly accepted by the scientific community, and that it in no way conflicts with, nor does it deny, the existence of a divine creator."



If it is to survive in the intellectual climate of today... our theology requires fresh expression in evolutionary terms. When we think about God in the post-Darwinian world we cannot have exactly the same thoughts that Augustine, Aquinas, or for that matter our grandparents and parents had. —John Haught, *An Evolving Dialogue*

Those first chapters are much more like poetry than prose, replete with religious and not scientific truths, conveying profound truths about us, about God, and about the universe we inhabit.

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*

Critical thinking leads to an understanding of why the details of Genesis are as they are and also makes clear that their truth is not to be understood in literal, factual terms... "This"—the universe and we—is not self-caused, but grounded in the sacred. "This" is utterly remarkable and wondrous, a Mystery beyond words that evokes wonder, awe and praise. We begin our lives "in paradise," but we all experience expulsion into a world of exile, anxiety, self-preoccupation, bondage, and conflict. And yes, also a world of goodness and beauty: it is the creation of God. But it is a world in which something is awry. —Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*