

# The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

Our first issue of the year is usually around the topic of religious education. The present issue of the Newsletter reflects on the religious and educational implications of the Darwin wars, specifically, the August decision of the Kansas School Board on the matter. Seventy-five years ago, the country was split by the Scopes trial in Tennessee in which a high school teacher was found guilty of violating the state's law against the teaching of evolution. For fifty years the problem seemed settled. But starting in the mid-1970s, the question resurfaced with new urgency. Today, "teaching evolution" remains a central symbol of the country's cultural conflict.

Three essays follow: The first by Margaret O'Brien Steinfels is reprinted from a *Commonweal* editorial. It acknowledges the religious implications on both sides of the split. The second essay, is by Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of educational history at New York University. He wonders at the educational assumptions in the dispute and points out the inconsistencies on both sides. The third essay is by Gabriel Moran who uses the dispute to reflect on the nature of teaching and the need to examine educational reform beyond the classroom.

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## EXPELLING DARWIN

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

In every flap about evolution, it seems, there is a new Scopes Trial struggling to be born. Why else so much fuss over the Kansas Board of Education's promulgation of guidelines that, if followed, would eliminate any teaching about the evolution of species and natural selection from the science curriculum in public schools? The board, which passed its standards by a 6-4 vote, has no power over the state's 304 public school districts, which can teach evolution or not as they see fit. All the board can do is declare that it will not include anything on these topics in the statewide tests. That is enough, however, to make creationists rejoice and liberal pundits decry a looming threat to "sound science."

It is hard to imagine any other pedagogical recommendation about teaching math, spelling or geography, for example, stirring such national attention, coming as it did from a relatively powerless board in one Middle American state. But evolution has long been a touchstone of where one stands in American culture, and Darwin's defenders react as ritualistically as his uncultured despisers, driven to reenact the whole saga of struggle against sin and darkness, especially that mythic moment in Dayton, Tennessee, when modernity and unfettered inquiry defied the forces of benighted fundamentalism. Never mind that Edward Larson's Pulitzer Prize-winning Summer for the Gods shows how much of the science-versus-superstition, tolerance-versus-dogmatism rendering of the Scopes trial is indeed myth, crystallized in the McCarthy-era drama and film, Inherit the Wind. The point is that, for many Americans, conflicts over evolution become conflicts over what they hold most deeply, most religiously, one could say, even in the case of avowed secularists.

Catholics, for the most part, have not seen it that way. Not tied to a literal reading of Scripture, Catholicism adjusted to the scientific evidence, not without reservations and difficulties, but far more easily than Protestantism. Some years ago, a survey of clergy showed that virtually all Catholic priests, in contrast to a significant segment of Protestant leadership, considered evolution strictly a nonproblem. So there is a tendency to look at dust-ups like the current one in Kansas with a detached and superior air. Galileo, after all, is enough of a burden.

That kind of complacency would be naive. Believers who saw from the start that the theory of evolution by natural selection had important religious implications, going beyond any ostensible clash with the poetic "days" of Genesis, were right. Nonbelievers who saw from the start that the theory of evolution by natural selection made their agnosticism or atheism a lot more plausible, even if not logically inevitable, were also right. Chance, time, and reproductive advantage could do everything that natural theology had so confidently declared the sure sign of God's handiwork. Today, scientific popularizers of evolutionary theory regularly draw metaphysical and theological conclusions from their science, whether in the aggressively antireligious form of a Richard Dawkins or the kinder, gentler kiss-off of a Stephen Jay Gould.

Consider the 1995 "Statement on the Teaching of Evolution" by the National Association of Biology Teachers, defining evolution as "an unsupervised, impersonal, unpredictable and natural process" - later grudgingly amended when a distinguished philosopher and an equally distinguished historian of world religions pointed out the theological claims packed into those first two adjectives.

At the popular level, evolution by natural selection frequently functions less as scientific theory than as an alternative creation story, competing with theistic ones. That probably explains why, to the consternation of many scientists, the polls show so many Americans resistant to the theory. Actually, the polls notwithstanding, we suspect that a sizeable number of Americans simply hew to two rival accounts of life's origins and development, one personal and providential, the other blind and mechanical, not really reconciling them as much as treating each with varying degrees of skepticism.

This reluctance to face up to underlying conflicts is not limited to the popular mind. Editorialists whose tone suggested that the Kansas board's action had touched a vital ideological nerve nonetheless preferred to couch their objections in strictly practical terms. The New York Times, the voice of liberal secular reason, lamented that in Kansas "bright students who might be inclined to pursue scientific careers" could now reach college unprepared. The Times's star columnist, Frank Rich speculated that taxpayers might have "to foot the bill in future welfare programs for graduates of evolution-free high schools sentenced to the bottom rung of the new economy."

But the same paper's reporters made quite clear that what was involved was not just a stumbling block on the road to Harvard but a clash of world views. "At issue for Kansans," wrote Jacques Steinberg from Topeka, "is nothing less than reconciling two central explanations of life: the Darwinian theory that man and monkey gradually branched off of the same family tree millions of years ago as they adjusted to a changing environment, a contention heavily rooted in scientific evidence, and the creationist belief that a divine being has been pulling the biological levers of the universe, including the origin of man, as described in the Bible." Add the supposition that this man-monkey branching was the result of mindless natural mechanisms. Subtract the trivializing, anthropomorphic image of "pulling the biological levers." The result is a serious conflict.

A conflict, one must admit, that is essentially philosophical and theological. And, philosophy and theology being effectively excluded from American public education, the vacuum has been filled by the farrago of anti-Darwinian polemic known as creation science. Although creationist and creation science are terms sometimes extended to any insistence on divine creation or any legitimate criticism of neo-Darwinian argument, they properly refer to the tireless efforts, no matter how strained, to put a scientific veneer on a literal reading of Genesis. The challenge posed by this conflict has not been adequately met, whether in religious education, Sunday preaching, theological exploration, or thoughtful intervention in public debate.

## RELATIVELY SPEAKING

By Jonathan Zimmerman

Here's a pop quiz fresh from the front pages. Who said, "If they're going to teach [one side], then they should teach the other also and let a child make up its own mind"?

- a. A black educator in Gary, Indiana.
- b. A Jewish spokesman in Coral Gables, Florida
- c. A Pentecostal minister in Junction City, Kansas

The correct answer, of course, is "c." Reverend Thurman Young of the Faith Tabernacle was speaking in support of his state Board of Education, which voted 6 to 4 to remove most mentions of evolution from Kansas's science curriculum. Young does not believe in evolution; if he were in charge, he told the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, he'd bar the topic altogether. But he acknowledged, Kansans differ sharply on the issue, so the state should accommodate all points of view.

The Board of Education's decision capped more than a year of debate, which began when the board appointed a committee of 27 scientists and educators to devise new guidelines for science instruction. The panel's recommendation included more than two pages of material about evolution. But most of this information was deleted by board member and former Kansas Republican Party chairman Steve Abrams, who substituted a statement that the earth's biological complexity implies "an intelligent designer." Although some scientists necessarily quarrel with the idea of an intelligent designer - the Big Bang, after all, was a pretty miraculous event - the theistic interpretation of Abram's declaration prompted protests, and the board voted to remove it. But at the same time, the board also agreed to drop all references to the big Bang theory of creation as well as to macroevolution, the process by which one species evolves into another. The standards retain material about microevolution, the process of change within a species; but these references pale next to the science committee's original report, describing evolution as a "broad, unifying theoretical framework in biology."

How can the Kansas Board of Education's defenders construe these developments as a victory for intellectual freedom? They simply contend that Americans adhere to a wide array of viewpoints on the origins of human life. By including evolution in its state curriculum, they claim, Kansas gave its imprimatur to one view and insulted the others. Better to leave the entire matter to local school districts, they say, where perspectives can - or should - receive "equal time."

Readers will recognize this argument as the relativistic trope that has long been invoked by liberal supporters of multiculturalism and women's studies. But creationists, too, began using it as early as the 1960s. After the Supreme Court's 1968 *Epperson* decision, in which the Court struck down state bans on teaching evolution, Christian activists began to demand measures requiring schools to present the Biblical creation story alongside Darwinism. Meanwhile, a burgeoning network of think tanks and self-described "scholars" promoted "creation science," insisting that the fossil record and other geological data were consistent with a near-literal reading of Genesis.

The Court dealt this effort a temporary blow in 1987, when it rejected a Louisiana law that would have required equal time for creationism in science classes. As in Kansas, however, activists simply shifted their focus from legislatures to state and local school boards. In Alabama, for example, the state school board requires biology textbooks to carry a disclaimer that "any statement about life's origins should be considered as theory not fact." Countless local districts now direct science teachers to include "alternative explanations" or "different narratives" when discussing evolution.

In practical terms, these equal-time policies generally mean no time for evolution. Even in so-called "free" school systems, where instructors are ostensibly allowed to teach the subject as they wish, many teachers avoid or omit discussions of evolution for fear of alienating fundamentalist parents. After the Kansas school board's action, which eliminated questions about evolution from students assessment tests, Kansas instructors will be less likely than ever to address the topic.

Suppose, though, that some mechanism could guarantee a full and free discussion of human origins in America's classrooms. For champions of equal time, a huge philosophical problem would remain: relativism. After all, supporters of equal time for creationism alongside evolution are generally the same people who insist that "situational ethics" are destroying America. They complain that children are taught fuzzy, inconsistent messages rather than fixed codes of right and wrong. Multicultural curricula are guilty of espousing the insidious idea that there is no single Truth, only my truth and your truth, both of which usually reflect our races, ethnicities, and genders.

When it comes to evolution, however, these single-minded absolutists start to sound just like the multiculturalists they abhor. Jerry Falwell now maintains that John T. Scopes should not have been convicted in his famous 1925 trial, because Scopes was simply "teaching both points of view - evolution and creation." Would Falwell support an equally open-ended approach to premarital sex? Or homosexuality? Of course, a similar contradiction plagues many on the multicultural left. While liberals welcome "multiple perspectives" offered by gays, women, and racial minorities, they scoff when fundamentalist Christians demand equal respect and representation.

Perhaps the real problem is that none of the activists on either side are being sincere when they claim that all they want is for children to formulate their own conclusions. Instead, the activists really want children to absorb their opinions. How many advocates of equal time for creationism really want students to be able to conclude that, yes, humans did evolve from apes? How many feminists would let a class decide that a woman's place is in the home after all.

We all claim to support "discussion," of course. But discussion with a preordained outcome isn't discussion at all; it's propaganda. Nothing will change until adults honestly encourage children to make up their own minds p about evolution and about everything else.

## THINKING ABOUT TEACHING

By Gabriel Moran

The recent action of the Kansas School Board directed at the teaching of evolution reveals a lack of understanding of evolution. More profoundly, it reveals a problem with the meaning of teaching. What does it mean to teach something? Unfortunately, the people who ridicule the anti-evolution lobby often work with a similar assumption about teaching, namely, that to teach means to tell pupils the truth. What is most worrisome is not whether evolution is being taught in schools, but what is being assumed about the teaching of literature, the teaching of morality or the teaching of history.

The nature of teaching does not seem to be a prominent question in the history of philosophy. Perhaps philosophers have shied away from the question because, while it is easy to undermine naive notions of transmitting knowledge, it is not so easy to describe an alternative understanding of teaching. Socrates is the first key figure in western thought to engage the problem of teaching; it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that he was also the last. Alfred North Whitehead's famous statement that all western philosophy consists of footnotes to Plato might be specified and reformulated as: All western philosophy of teaching consists of reactions to Socrates.

The reactions are twofold: 1) Some people think that the nature of teaching was solved by Socrates and his method of "Socratic dialogue." Instead of telling students the truth, the teacher draws out the truth by clever techniques of questioning. 2) Some people think that Socrates proved that no one can teach anyone anything. People who are called teachers do not really teach. They provide occasions of learning, they try to motivate students, they should get out of the students' way.

The first reaction, Socratic dialogue, is a helpful method, especially in the classroom. Any competent classroom instructor asks questions, tries to get students to reflect on what they already know, engages in conversation. But the mystery at the heart of teaching is not engaged by these moves. The metaphor shifts from pushing in knowledge to pulling it out, but a naive notion of knowledge may remain untouched by this change in classroom strategy.

The second reaction - no one can teach anyone anything - represents a shocking truth, namely, that no matter how good the intention and how sound the execution, there is no necessary connection between the individual teacher's intention to teach and anyone's learning what the teacher intends. Every experienced classroom instructor knows this truth, although he or she may not be inclined to dwell on it. If one does reflect on the gap between the teacher's intention and the pupils' learning, it can lead to cynicism about what one is being paid for or else to a search for a new vocation.

Actual schools are not viewed from the outside as places of teaching. They are seen as holding stations for a society that does not have a place for children and young adults. The belief that no one can teach anyone anything must be hidden from the pupils in the schools, and, if possible, from the so called teachers. That can be fairly easily done in elementary school, once the first grader is socialized into the ritual of school. Society's pretense begins to slip in high school, a fact not unrelated to the ennui and violence that regularly surface in high schools. In college, much of the pretense of teaching is simply dropped. The college student puts up with the peculiar ritual of lecturing while waiting to get the credits to qualify for a place in the outside world. A contrast between school and "the real world" is casually made by students and by people outside the school. Even college professors often use this language, although nothing could be more insulting to their profession.

This cynical description of the contemporary school is what leads would be radicals to call for the abolition of school. In addition to the fact that "de-schooling" will never happen, the protest is itself based on a cynical attitude to teaching. The radical reformer often paints an idyllic picture of how young people would learn with enthusiasm and joy if they were not subjected to teachers and a disciplined environment. But much of human learning takes hard work and all of learning takes teaching.

What is needed as the basis of reform is a more comprehensive theory and practice of teaching-learning. Philosophers from Plato to the present have failed us; even John Dewey, who has brilliant asides on the topic, has no philosophy of teaching. But we are not without resources for the practice of teaching and an implied theory of teaching. Philosophers have usually begun with the problem of a man explaining things to boys; this tradition continues today when college professors write most of the books and essays on teaching.

No mother of an infant begins the practice of teaching by explaining things to pupils. She begins by showing someone how to do something, a physical activity in which there may be few if any words. When words initially appear in teaching they are used as direct commands rather than as rational explanations. Every religious tradition teaches through rituals and examples; doctrines are a late addition to the teaching. In most contexts people easily recognize that teaching means to show someone how to do something. And learning means responding to being shown how to do something. Teaching and learning is a single process seen from opposite ends.

Teaching in a classroom is not the whole of teaching nor even the main case of teaching. It is certainly not the place to start reflecting on the nature of teaching. Academic instruction is a very peculiar form of teaching that requires a stringent set of conditions. The teacher's task in this strange setting is to clarify what students have already learned from reading books, using the Internet and engaging in other experiences outside the school. That is why fifty-year-olds who go back to school, usually with some trepidation, inevitably do well, while a great many fifteen-year-olds

are bored out of their minds or are rebellious in the classroom.

The answer to this problem is not to cast fifteen-year-olds out on their own, based on the dubious premise that they are more mature than adolescents used to be. They need teaching, as does every human being. That teaching includes classroom instruction but much less of it than is currently demanded of them and only in conjunction with other kinds of teaching-learning. Until the late nineteenth century, most human beings were educated in the home and on the work site; a lucky minority also learned their letters in school. The movement that attempted to extend literacy to everyone was admirable except that the school swallowed the language of teaching and learning. In history books of the future, the century of 1860-1960 will be seen as an aberration in the history of education, a period when education was equated with children in schools and when teaching was equated with classroom instruction.

Since the 1960s the whole established system has been in dangerous disarray. Some reform measures are worthwhile but are weighed down by our inadequate language of teaching-learning. For example, lengthening the school day could be useful if the school is seen as a coordinator of complementary forms of teaching-learning: artistic and athletic performance, job training, volunteer service work and classrooms. But simply adding more classroom time could worsen things. Very few people can make good use of classroom learning for more than two or three hours a day and more than three or four times a week. That is not to disparage the classroom; the teaching-learning of the classroom can be an invaluable asset; but excessive exposure to it is deadening.

The main reform needed, therefore, is to develop apprenticeship programs for high school and college students, instead of our century-old system of having classrooms for academically gifted students and job training for everyone judged to be not so gifted. But no serious change will happen until we change the language of teacher and teaching. The school people who currently exercise a presumed ownership of those terms have to be willing to let go of them. Most of these schoolteachers are working long hours with great dedication. They are understandably resistant to relinquishing what is in their possession. But giving up the exclusive claim to "teach" and "teacher" would improve their work and remove some of the burden unfairly placed upon schoolteachers.

There is no such thing as the "teaching profession"; every profession worthy of the name teaches. There is, however, a profession of academic instruction that requires skill, preparation and hard work. The people who do this work deserve more economic support and higher status than our society now provides. Classroom teaching is indispensable for students of all ages to help make sense of the rest of their education where most teaching occurs.