

# *The How and Why of It*

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In 1925, John Thomas Scopes was arrested and imprisoned in Dayton, TN for violating a state law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools. After a dramatic trial that received national attention and a nine minute deliberation, John Scopes was found guilty. It would seem that the study of evolution took a hit that day, but in the court of public opinion, science won and over time, most Americans came to respect Scopes and the need for hard science in our schools.

But, the issue hasn't been put to rest. Fast forward to 2005, Dover Pennsylvania, 146 years since the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. Bill Buckingham, a member of the Dover School Board raised concerns about the biology textbook accusing that it was laced with Darwinism. He explicitly declared it "inexcusable to have a book that says man [sic] descended from apes with nothing to counterbalance it."<sup>1</sup> It was soon decided that the following statement be made before the section on evolution is taught:

The Pennsylvania Academic Standards require students to learn about Darwin's theory of evolution and eventually to take a standardized test of which evolution is a part. Because Darwin's Theory is a theory, it is still being tested as new evidence is discovered. The Theory is not a fact. Gaps in the Theory exist for which there is no evidence... As is true with any theory, students are encouraged to keep an open mind... Intelligent design is an explanation of the origin of life that differs from Darwin's view. The reference book, *Of Pandas and People*, is available for students to see if they would like to explore this view....

Three members of the school board resigned in protest and science teachers refused to read the statement, citing a separate mandate not to teach things they know to be untrue.

It was read, nonetheless, by an administrator and eleven families brought the school board to court. Ultimately, a conservative judge newly appointed by President Bush, found in favor of the plaintiffs, declaring that Intelligent Design is not science and cannot be taught in science classes.

What is so frightening about evolution? Why are people willing to go to court to prevent evolution from being taught? What did Darwin say that is so threatening?

Charles Darwin illuminated a shared origin and history that has the potential to break down barriers and bring us all together as one human family. The creation of International Darwin Day, which we're celebrating today, is intended to emphasize the experience of being human that all people hold in common. Current research in the field of genetics, including that on the human genome, has conclusively shown that all humans are essentially identical and that we are genetically related to all other living beings on this planet. Thus an enlightened view of Darwinism is one of unity and equality among all humans and also one that fosters a deeper sense of respect and appreciation for life. Charles Darwin opened new connections between humans and between human and non-human species, deepening our understanding of what it means to be part of this interconnected web of existence.

"One meaning of Unitarianism is the belief that all that exists is ultimately one, whatever form it takes; matter and energy, body and soul, mind and heart, living and non-living things, deduction and intuition, emotion and intellect, love and reason, science and religion... Universalism entails a belief that everything belongs. Science has uncovered enough about genetics to show us that we belong together within the human family, among primates, among all living things, among the stars... Science and religion together reveal a world of wonder and of singularity."

While there's great potential in that interpretation of the implications of Darwin's contribution, not everyone shares those insights. In some ways, Darwin's groundbreaking work has expanded the divide between peoples, emphasizing instead the ways we disagree. Even members of his own family were concerned about publishing his work after his death and his wife had pieces of his autobiography edited out so as not to offend

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitzmiller\\_v.\\_Dover\\_Area\\_School\\_District](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitzmiller_v._Dover_Area_School_District). February 23, 2012

some close Christian friends.

The culture wars aren't new. This is an old struggle. Some people are inspired by new ideas and want to push human progress forward and some are comforted by tradition and are not compelled by a desire to change. You'd be hard pressed to find a scientist who doesn't believe in evolution, but according to a Gallup poll, 45% of American adults said that they don't think evolution had any role in shaping humans.

Teaching evolution vs. creationism isn't the only arena for this struggle. We see the same impulses around climate change, marriage equality and recently around contraception. Let's not kid ourselves. We aren't confronting alternative interpretations of facts. This is about two different ways of knowing. Science uses empirical data to determine how things happened. The people refuting those findings are using religion as the ground of their knowledge base.

I'm obviously a religious person. People who associate religion with right-wing politics or conservative approaches sometimes refute my claim to be religious which is both funny and a little sad to me. All of my degrees are in theology from well-respected schools and ministry has been my career path since I was 19. I'm ordained and carry the title of Reverend. I've served in churches, schools and hospitals as chaplain and yet some people will still tell me I'm not "really" religious because I don't think the bible should be read literally, because I believe in evolution and look to science to tell me how things happened and because I support social progress. To be clear, those who doubt my claims to being religious aren't religious conservatives, but liberals.

Some of you will tell me that you're not religious. You worship with your congregation most Sundays. You donate significant amounts of money and time here. You call on your pastor for spiritual direction or help in a family crisis. Your congregation is a primary community for you and many of you are or have raised your children in a congregational context in which they attended Sunday School most weeks. But, when pressed, you'll say that you aren't religious.

This is the result of an us/them mentality that forces many liberals to declare "We are not Them". We use science as a primary source of knowledge. We are open to human progress. We believe in civil rights and human rights and women's rights and reproductive rights. We use reason as a filter for new information and we reject ideas that don't hold up to either reason or experience. We are not Them. If They are religious, then We are not. We are the opposite of Them.

I'm not willing to let go of the claim to be religious that easily. There are several effective ways to define religion, but the definition to which I'm most partial declares that religion is the way humans face mystery, in community. I believe that's what we are doing here. Together, we are confronting all the mysteries and complexities of life.

Does science end mystery? I don't think so. The more science I learn, the more intricate life appears to be. And more gorgeous. Remember that Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion because we believe that revelation is not sealed. We don't think that truth was revealed once for all time, but that it continues to unfold. Frankly, that's an evolutionary view of truth. At the same time, it opens the possibility that revelation comes to us through science. That the result of ordered, objective investigation opens up religious truths. These things are not exclusionary, but relational. It's because scientists can reveal the nature of life that we can live richly and deeply.

Our own Joseph Priestly, a minister and scientist credited with discovering oxygen said, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Let us examine everything with the greatest freedom, without any regard to consequences...Let us sow the seeds of truth...Distrust all those who require you to abandon reason, wherever religion is concerned.

Our task as a religious community isn't to uncover how things happen. That's the work of the scientist. I'm not here as a professor of anything. Sometimes when writing a sermon, I default to informationals and have to edit out all kinds of facts and figures. We investigate facts and gather information in other arenas. Religion doesn't speak to the how of life, but the why of it. My job is to put that information in the context of our lives, to excavate them for meaning. I'm not a scientist, but a minister. I interpret the facts the scientists discover.

Science and religion are approached as a false dicotomy. It is as if one cancels out the other, like we have to make a choice. I see it often: Science vs. Religion. I think our challenge is not to make a choice, but to create a unity. Science opens up the reality of the planet and unveils millennia of mystery and religion puts all that new

information in context and gives it meaning.

We can see this articulated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Bishop of Oxford, declared that Darwin was guilty of a ‘tendency to limit God’s glory in creation,’ that ‘the principle of natural selection is absolutely incompatible with the word of God.’ He later congratulated himself for not being descended from a monkey.

The reply came from Thomas Henry Huxley, who said: ‘If I had to choose, I would prefer to be a descendant of a humble monkey rather than of a man who employs his knowledge and eloquence in misrepresenting those who are wearing out their lives in the search for real truth.’<sup>2</sup>

I believe that those who want creationism or Intelligent Design taught in science classes don’t understand that it’s possible to accept evolution as fact without rejecting the deeper truths the Genesis story might open. It’s not an either/or. There seems to be a sense that eliminating natural science from schools is a victory for god, as if god isn’t part of the natural world. Fighting for Intelligent Design is a show of faith in the god of Genesis.

In the same way, there are those who believe that acceptance of Darwin’s discoveries leads to an inevitable rejection of god. Darwin himself was a Unitarian which he called, quoting his grandfather, a “featherbed to catch a falling Christian.” He described himself as a deist, a theist and later as an agnostic. After reading some of his autobiography, I’d call him an atheist, but he wasn’t comfortable with that label.

Whether or not Darwin was an atheist, doesn’t preclude the possibility in 2012 of being a religious person, being a believer (those are two separate things) and accepting what Darwin taught about the evolution of all life from common ancestry resulting from a process of natural selection. As I’ve already said, I am a religious person who is grateful for the insight of scientists like Charles Darwin, as I suspect is true of most of you. I might also call myself a believer, if you’ll accept my non-anthropomorphic, even non-self-conscious understanding of god. I am saying this because it’s become all too common for Americans to accept the idea that religion and science are conflicted.

I might suggest, for those who don’t think Darwinism leads down the inevitable path to atheism, that Darwin introduces us to a new god. No longer perfect and complete, we can imagine a god who, like us and all of life, is becoming. Process theologians, using Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, offer an image of a god who, is Not Yet. A god on a path of progress.

Before Darwin, the common idea was that god created humans in the image of god. This concept created a hard and fast line between humans and everyone else that we can no longer claim. Darwinism removed god from the heavens and relocated that god in the process of becoming. God, like all of life, is now moving slowing into consciousness, into greater being. Rabbi Larry Troster, a friend and teacher of mine, suggests that Darwin moved god deeper into life and creates reasoned panentheism or pantheism. Panentheism declares that god is known through all living beings while pantheism locates god within and not in any way separate from the natural world. This theology eliminates duality and brings science and religion, body and spirit, together.

Regardless of the rejection of evolution from a percentage of the American population or our fear of having to choose between religion and science, Darwin’s naturalism and keen observation of our planet and the process of becoming, has the potential to connect us more profoundly with the rest of the natural world.

Darwin broke down the possibility of an “us” and “them”, even if that’s what we’re experiencing around his teachings. I’m not worried about that. We live in the meantime. Every transformative truth takes time to digest. It’s part of the process. The facts remain regardless of our acceptance of them. And the fact is, like it or not, we share a common ancestry with each other, with all other people and with non-human creatures.

Just look at your family tree. You have two biological parents and four grandparents. If we go back 12 generations, which brings us to the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we each have more than 4,000 direct ancestors. Real people who struggled, accomplished, suffered, and succeeded. Now, go further back. The math shows nearly 300 million ancestors just 28 generations ago, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century! It’s almost certain mathematically that our ggggggg grandparents built Stonehenge, invented farming, were pharaohs, kings, slaves, explorers, heroes, and saber-toothed cat fighters! Back farther – Millions more ancestors! Brave ape like people, crossing the African savannah, struggling to feed children, small furry ggg grandparents swiftly evading snarling mammoths. Their lives were as real as ours today, their struggles more harrowing. Further! Billions of Ancestors! The first animal to struggle onto land, the first fish to swim, the first eye to see the world. Their Ancestors, clusters of cells and bacteria before that – We share these ancestors with all life on Earth.

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<sup>2</sup> See the UUA pamphlet called Science and Religion.

There is no us and them. There is only us. That's the great truth Darwin brought us. Fascinating, uncomfortable, terrifying, transformative and...True.