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“WITH FRIENDS LIKE THOSE, WHO NEEDS ENEMIES”:
HOW AGGRESSIVE ATHEISM IMPEDES
THE ACCEPTANCE OF EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY

For some forty years, since its Supreme Court struck down Arkansas’ law prohibiting the teaching of human evolution in the public schools of the state,¹ the United States has been experiencing a kind of curriculum war over the place of evolution and its would-be rivals in the biology classrooms of the public schools. Although two aspects of American culture (the First Amendment to the Constitution and the prominence of fundamentalist Protestantism in American religious demography), make this a peculiarly American battle, it is not uniquely American, as some remarks made by Maciej Giertych and Mirosław Orzechowski a few years ago remind us.² In this paper, I want to say something about why this battle continues, and in particular about who is to blame for it.

There is, to be sure, an old narrative to the effect that religion has always been at war with science and that the current controversy is just one more campaign in that war. Thomas H. Huxley, an early and tenacious defender of Darwin’s theory of evolution, articulated such a view. He wrote in a letter to a friend that:³

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¹ Initiated Act № 1 (of 1928) was struck down in *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968), 393 U.S. 97.

² See, for example, Giertych’s “Creationism, Evolution: Nothing Has Been Proved,” *Nature* (16 Nov 2006), 444: № 7117): 265, and his articles in *Encyklopedia “Białych Plam”* (PWE, 2000, 2001), 4: 221–223 and 6: 23–37. For Orzechowski, see quotation of his remarks on *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 14 Oct 2006.

³ Letter to Frederick Dyster, 30 January 1859, Huxley Papers, Imperial College, Huxley Archives, 15, 106 (quoted in Adrian Desmond, *Huxley: From Devil’s Disciple To Evolution’s High Priest* (Addison-Wesley, 1997), 253).

both [Theology and Parsondom] are in my mind the natural and irreconcilable enemies of Science. ... If I have a wish to live thirty years, it is that I may see the foot of Science on the necks of her enemies.

In a review of *The Origin of Species* he wrote that:⁴

Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules; and history records that whenever science and orthodoxy have been fairly opposed, the latter has been forced to retire from the lists, bleeding and crushed if not annihilated; scotched, if not slain.

This narrative received its classical exposition in the work of two Americans — John William Draper, in his *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874), and Andrew Dickson White, in his two-volume *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896)

The narrative proposed by these two men seems to have staying power. It can be found in the lede of every journalist's story about science and religion. Unfortunately, the Draper-White approach to historiography is not so much a lens that brings its subject into focus as it is a fun-house mirror that distorts the image it reflects. It nevertheless continues to be applied to the social history of evolutionary biology. On this telling, the chief battles in religion's alleged war against evolution would be the Wilberforce-Huxley exchange of 1860, the Scopes Trial of 1925 — and today's debates about school curricula.

Neither the Oxford exchange nor the Dayton trial is brought into focus by interpreting it through the lens of an historic struggle between religion and science, or between Christianity and evolution, but the critique of that understanding of the events of the 1860's and the 1920's will have to be left for another day. Darwinian evolutionary biology has, to be sure, been involved in two ideological wars in recent years, but neither of those was a war that can properly be characterized as one between science and religion. One of those wars was the war that Christian anti-evolutionists have waged against evolution, but those anti-evolutionists do not speak for religion; they do not even speak for Christianity. The second of those wars is the war waged by scientific anti-Christians against religion, but those anti-Christians do not speak for science. There are many Christians and many scientists who find no incompatibility between evolutionary

⁴ "The Origin of Species," *Westminster Review* (1860) 17: 541–70, at 556. The review, as was the custom of the day, was published anonymously.

biology and Christian doctrine, as the work of Archbishop Józef Życiński, among many others, makes clear.⁵ Neither war is a war of science versus religion.

Let us turn to the particulars of the on-going curriculum war. Although Arkansas' second attempt at an anti-evolution law, the Balanced Treatment for Creation-Science and Evolution-Science Act (Act 590) of 1981, was passed as a result of religious opposition to evolution, the primary plaintiff in the suit challenging the law's constitutionality in federal court,⁶ William McLean, was a Methodist minister. He was joined in the suit by the Catholic Bishop of Little Rock, three other bishops (two Methodist and one Episcopalian), and a seven other Methodist and Presbyterian ministers. The primary plaintiff in the challenge to Louisiana's 1982 "Balanced Treatment for Creation-Science and Evolution-Science in Public School Instruction" Act was a school teacher, but he was joined in the suit⁷ by a Catholic priest, a rabbi, and ministers from five different Protestant denominations.

It cannot, to be sure, be denied that people with religious motivations continue to object to the teaching of evolution in the public schools. The bases for these objections are various. Some Christians adhere to hermeneutic principles that put *Genesis* 1 in conflict with evolutionary theory. Why they (or at least the Protestants among them) take the six days of creation more literally than the sixth chapter of John's Gospel I have never been able to understand, but it is not these Christians who are my concern now. My interest here is rather in those who do not believe in six-day creationism, with its young earth and strata-forming flood, but who nevertheless manifest a strong suspicion of evolutionary theory. Why do they continue to have that suspicion?

There are no doubt a variety of explanations. For example, although Darwin's theory explains a wide array of facts from paleontology, biogeography, comparative anatomy, systematics, and embryology, these are facts that are generally unknown to laymen. Non-biologists simply do not wonder why the fauna of the Cape Verde Islands resembles precisely the fauna of the nearest mainland or why the structure of bat wings resembles that of whale flippers. They do wonder how a species that lacks wings could ever turn into a species that has them. This lack of wonder about the features of the world that Darwin is trying to explain,

⁵ Życiński's *Bóg i ewolucja: Podstawowe pytania ewolucjonizmu chrześcijańskiego* (TN KUL, 2002) is now available in English translation as *God and Evolution: Fundamental Questions of Christian Evolutionism* (CUA, 2006). His *Wszechświat emergentny: Bóg w ewolucji przyrody* (KUL, 2009) has not been translated.

⁶ *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education*, 529 F. Supp. 1255 (ED Ark.1982).

⁷ *Aguillard v. Treen*, 634 F. Supp. 426 (ED La.1985).

combined with the somewhat counterintuitive nature of Darwin's solution (which, to highlight the paradox, attributes a common ancestry to beetles and whales) generates much of the scepticism that Darwinism continues to face. As Darwin wrote:⁸

Any one whose disposition leads him to attach more weight to unexplained difficulties than to the explanation of a certain number of facts will certainly reject my theory.

That alone would not, however, explain the intensity of feeling over this issue. I want to suggest that part of the explanation for this suspicion, particularly among religious people, lies in the activities of a group of secularist scientists — I shall call them the evolutionist-philosophizers — who hold one or the other (or both) of two theses about the implications and significance of science (in general) and evolutionary biology (in particular). The exact thesis varying from author to author, I will state them in slightly fuzzy form. The first is that

P1. Science presupposes or otherwise shows that Christianity is false.

The second is that

P2. The evolutionary sciences have, by themselves, important consequences relevant to our understanding of man's place in nature.

It is important to see that these theses are logically distinct. P1's claim about the incompatibility of science and Christianity does not imply that the evolutionary sciences themselves have anything to offer about man's place in nature, so one could assert P1 without going on to endorse P2. Whether one thinks that P1 would follow from P2 would depend on what one thinks are the implications of evolutionary theory and what one thinks that Christianity asserts.

Let us begin with P1. From the first days of evolutionary biology there has been a mix of anti-clericals, agnostics, and atheists who have been eager to put science in general, and evolutionary biology in particular, to use in their own war on religion—not science's war, but their own (philosophical) war. Comments from Huxley's letters, quoted above, suggest such an attitude. This war was waged in the nineteenth century by Clémence Royer, Carl Vogt, and Ernst Haeckel, and in the twentieth by Richard Dawkins, William Provine, and Daniel Dennett.

⁸ *The Origin of Species* (Murray, 1859), 482.

Royer, Darwin’s first French translator, began her long preface to *De L’Origine des Espèces* with the sentence, “Yes, I believe in revelation, but in a permanent revelation of man to himself and by himself”⁹ Haeckel, perhaps Germany’s leading evolutionary biologist and evolutionist-philosophizer, wrote that “in our day, Charles Darwin, with ... over-powering might, has destroyed the ruling error-doctrines of the mystical creation dogma and through his reform of developmental theory has elevated the whole sensibility, thought, and will of mankind onto a higher plane.”¹⁰ William B. Provine, historian of biology at White’s old university, once wrote:¹¹

[Darwin] understood immediately that if natural selection explained adaptations, and evolution by descent were true, then the argument from design was dead and all that went with it, namely the existence of a personal god, free will, life after death, immutable moral laws, and ultimate meaning in life.

And Richard C. Lewontin, Harvard biologist wrote that:¹²

Whatever the desire to reconcile science and religion may be, there is no escape from the fundamental contradiction between evolution and creationism. They are irreconcilable world views. Either the world of phenomena is a consequence of the regular operation of repeatable causes and their repeatable effects ... or else at every instant all physical regularities may be ruptured and a totally unforeseeable set of events may occur. One must take sides on the issue of whether the sun is sure to rise tomorrow. We cannot live simultaneously in a world of natural causation and of miracles, for if one miracle can occur, then there is no limit.

Unsurprisingly, remarks like these elicit anti-evolutionist reactions in some Christian circles. For an example, see the first chapter of Phillip E. Johnson’s *Reason in the Balance*.¹³ Johnson, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, was among the founders of the intelligent-design movement. Some people who care not a bit where grapevines come from do care a lot about where the wine at Cana came from. If some scientific theory implies that there could have been no miracle at that wedding feast, then, in their view, so much the worse for the scientific theory.

⁹ Guillaumin, 1862, p. v.

¹⁰ “Über die Naturanschauung von Darwin, Göthe, und Lamarck,” *Tageblatt der 55. Versammlung Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte* (1882), 81–91, 89.

¹¹ “Response to Phillip Johnson,” *First Things* 6 (October, 1990), pp. 23–24, here 23.

¹² “Introduction” in Laurie R. Godfrey, *Scientists Confront Creationism* (Norton, 1983), p. xxvi.

¹³ Inter-Varsity Press, 1998.

In addition to this attempt to use evolutionary biology as an argument for atheism, there is another line of thought that can be found among the evolutionist-philosophizers — the second of the two theses mentioned above. P2 does not directly address the truth of Christianity, but nevertheless in its own way makes the place of evolutionary biology in the science classrooms of the public schools insecure. In his popular *Why Evolution is True*, Chicago biologist Jerry A. Coyne wrote:¹⁴

Learning about evolution can transform us in a deep way. It shows us our place in the whole splendid and extraordinary panoply of life. It unites us with every living thing on the earth today and with myriads of creatures long dead. Evolution gives us the true account of our origins, replacing the myths that satisfied us for thousands of years.

This is not quite biology. What is it?

In *Natural Law & Natural Rights*, John Finnis identifies religion as one of what he calls “seven basic forms of [human] good.” He defines religion as reflection on two fundamental questions:¹⁵

- (1) How are all these orders [means & ends, priorities], which have their immediate origin in human initiative and pass away in death, related to the lasting order of the whole cosmos and to the origin, if any, of that order?
- (2) Is ... human freedom ... itself somehow subordinate to something that makes that human freedom, human intelligence, and human mastery possible ...?

In the passage quoted above, Coyne puts evolution to religious use (in Finnis’ sense). People who make evolutionary biology into a source of religion should not be surprised when other people, with different religious views, seek to exclude evolutionary biology from the science curriculum of the schools.

Fortunately for people who are only interested in using Darwin’s ideas to understand scientific questions, there is no need to believe that evolutionary biology has the implications imputed to it either by anti-Christian evolutionists or by evolutionist-philosophizers. Why anti-evolutionary Christians disbelieve the evolutionist-philosophizers on the point of what the scientific evidence shows (where many of those evolutionist-philosophizers have some expertise) and believe them on the point of the logical consequences of evolution outside of biology (where, one might think, their expertise is less) is not entirely clear. Perhaps these anti-evolutionists think that the judgment of these scientists on the first

¹⁴ Penguin, 2010, p. xv.

¹⁵ Oxford, 1980, p. 89.

point is influenced by their anti-religious biases, but that answer will not do. First, there are also many Christian scientists, from St. George Mivart to Kenneth Miller,¹⁶ who accept the evolutionary origin of species. Second, if anti-religious biases are warping judgments, there is no reason to think that the judgment about the implications of evolutionary biology is any less vulnerable to bias than is the judgment about its truth.

Darwin himself said little about theology or Christianity. Whatever the explanation for this science is, it is a simple fact. He says in his *Autobiography* that when he wrote the *Origin*, he was still a theist due to¹⁷

the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity of looking far backwards and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity.

Shortly after the publication of the first edition of *The Origin*, Charles Kingsley wrote to Darwin that:¹⁸

it is just as noble a conception of Deity, to believe that he created primal forms capable of self development into all forms needful *pro tempore & pro loco*, as to believe that He required a fresh act of intervention to supply the lacunas which he himself had made. I question whether the former be not the loftier thought.

Darwin thought so highly of Kingsley’s idea that he included it in the second edition of the book.¹⁹ He continued to drift towards agnosticism, however, and in a letter late in his life wrote about the argument introduced above that, “whether this is an argument of real value, I have never been able to decide,” concluding that “The safest conclusion seems to be that the whole subject is beyond the scope of man’s intellect.”²⁰

But Christians have no particular need to look to Darwin on this question. He was a brilliant scientist but, by his own admission, not at all a theologian. To his friend Joseph Hooker he wrote in 1870 that his theology was “a simple muddle.”²¹

¹⁶ Mivart, *The Genesis of Species* (Macmillan, 1871); Miller, *Finding Darwin’s God: A Scientist’s Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution* (Harper, 2000).

¹⁷ Francis Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, including an Autobiographical Chapter* (Murray, 1887), Vol. I, p. 312.

¹⁸ Charles Kingsley to Darwin, 18 Nov 1859, in *Life and Letters*, II, 287-289, at 288.

¹⁹ *The Origin of Species*, 2d ed. (Murray, 1860), p. 481.

²⁰ Darwin to N. D. Doedes, 2 Apr 1873, in *Life and Letters*, I, 174.

²¹ Letter of 12 July 1870, in Francis Darwin, *More Letters of Charles Darwin* (Murray, 1903), I, 321-322.

There are, however, plenty of Christians to whom we can look for inspiration and guidance about the relation of evolutionary biology to theism, creation, and providence. Already in Darwin's own day the question was addressed not only by Charles Kingsley but by scientists such as Asa Gray in the United States and St. George Mivart in England. At the end of the century, it was addressed by John Zahm, the Holy Cross priest and science-educator who did so much to build University of Notre Dame, and by the French Dominican Dalmas Leroy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the question was addressed by the great Jesuit entomologist, Erich Wasmann. In our own day, it has been addressed by Brown University biologist Kenneth Miller, Notre Dame philosopher Fr. Ernan McMullin, and Archbishop Józef Życiński of Lublin.²²

But the curriculum wars over evolutionary biology continue to rage. Who is to blame? In one sense, of course, it is the ant-evolutionists who are to blame. It is they who have tried to keep the teaching of evolutionary biology out of the public schools and, failing that, have tried to force what are in fact non-scientific alternatives into the science curriculum. But I don't think that they are the only ones whom supporters of evolutionary biology should blame for the recent troubles. Much of the blame falls on the secularizing evolutionist-philosophizers for making the claims identified above.

Is that accusation really fair? Even if the evolutionist-philosophizers do assert P1 or P2, it is not they who have tried to keep the teaching of evolutionary biology out of the public schools. It is anti-evolutionists who refuse to give up the fight. Are the evolutionist-philosophizers responsible for what their opponents do? Can one person be held responsible for the wrong-doing of another?

The answer to that question is: Sometimes yes; even if not always. Catholic moral theology has a traditional list of what are somewhat vaguely called the *novem peccata aliena*, ways of being partially responsible for someone else's sin.²³ In its standard English version,²⁴ it goes:

²² Gray, *Darwiniana: Essays and Reviews pertaining to Darwinism* (Harvard, 1876); Zahm, *Evolution and Dogma* (McBride, 1896); Leroy, *L'Évolution restreinte aux espèces organiques* (Delhomme & Briguët, 1891); Wasmann, *Die moderne Biologie und die Entwicklungstheorie*, 3d ed., (Herder, 1906); in English as *Modern Biology and the Theory of Evolution* (Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1910); McMullin, *Evolution and Creation* (Notre Dame, 1985), in Polish as *Ewolucja i stworzenie* (OBI, 1990).

²³ I have been unable to determine the source of the list. It is in existence already in the Middle Ages. St. Thomas quotes it in his *Commentary on the Book of Sentences* (*Super Sent.*, lib. 4 d. 15 q. 1 a. 5 qc. 3 co.). St. Alphonsus cites it in his *Theologia Moralis*, but both take it up only in the discussion of when someone is bound to make restitution for a theft committed by someone else. By the time it appears in vernacular devotional books and guides to the examination of conscience, it is

By counsel;
 By command;
 By consent;
 By provocation
 By praise or flattery;
 By silence
 By concealment;
 By partaking; and
 By defense of the ill done deed.

Most of these are not relevant to our case, but one of them — provocation — applies.

For an understanding of how provocation works, let us look at a scene from Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the one in which Cyrano has just said:²⁵

Take notice, boobies all,
 Who find my face’s center ornament
 A thing to jest at — that it is my wont
 (If the jester’s noble) before we part
 To let him taste my steel!

The Count de Guiche complains that Cyrano has become a nuisance and asks, “Will no one put him down?” The Viscount de Valvert goes up to Cyrano and says, “Sir, your nose is ... very big!” Cyrano mocks Valvert for being so unoriginal in his insult, Valvert challenges Cyrano to a duel and is seriously wounded. I want to say that Cyrano has done wrong in wounding Valvert but that de Guiche and Valvert are partly responsible in that they provoked him into fighting.

To be sure, one is not always responsible for the wrongs done by others in response to what one says or does. When St. Justin told the prefect Rusticus, “Do what you will, for we are Christians, and do not sacrifice to idols,”²⁶ he knew that his statement would lead Rusticus to mete out a *de facto* unjust punishment, but he was not responsible for Rusticus’ act of injustice. The fact that an act was voluntary on the part of the principal wrong-doer does not, however, automa-

generalized to ways of being accessory to (or associated with) any sin of another, and variations appear in the list.

²⁴ The Polish, German, and French lists are different both from the Latin and from the English list cited here (and for that matter, from one another), but these are differences in formulation, not differences of substance.

²⁵ Act I, scene 4.

²⁶ *Martyrdom of Justin, Chariton, and other Roman Martyrs* 4.

tically exculpate those whose earlier action provoked the principal wrong-doer to his misdeeds.

I want to suggest that the evolutionist-philosophizers are, in this respect, more like the Count de Guiche than they are like St. Justin. Why? St. Justin's statements in response to the prefect's questions were not only true but ones that he had an obligation to give.²⁷

P1 and P2 by contrast are not true.

As for P1, surely William Provine is capable of seeing, and is morally culpable for not seeing, that there is no logical connection between the argument from the adaptedness of living things to the existence of a designer-God, on the one hand, and questions of free will and personal immortality, on the other? The evolutionist-philosophizers are surely also capable of seeing that statements like those that Provine makes do harm when they lead others to reject evolutionary biology for religious reasons.

With respect to P2, it is not so hard to see that, since both naturalistic and theistic evolution are views logically consistent with each other and views that have very different implications for our understanding of man's place in nature. Therefore, the implications of the theory of evolution for this understanding are not a consequence of the theory of evolution alone. To suggest otherwise, to say, for example, that evolution can replace "the myths that satisfied us for thousands of years," is at best to entangle the theory of evolution in other battles.

Perhaps the evolutionist-philosophizers feel an obligation to enlighten the rest of us about what they think they know, but an erring conscience does not, at least not fully, excuse.²⁸

In any case, there simply is no obligation to make public proclamation of all that one believes to be true. Those who insist on seeing in the theory of evolution grander consequences than it has must still recognize the harm they do in public proclamation of this view, for in doing so, they do a harm for which they must take responsibility.

Religion, after all, has a special legal status in both the American and Polish constitutions. Walter Lippmann, writing on the American effort to pass anti-evolution laws (which he opposed) in the 1920's, recognized the significance of this.²⁹

²⁷ Matthew 10:32–33.

²⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a 2æ, 19.5.

²⁹ Walter Lippmann, *American Inquisitors: A Commentary on Dayton and Chicago* (Macmillan, 1928), 14.

[Anti-evolutionist William Jennings Bryan] asked whether, if it is wrong to compel people to support a creed they disbelieve, it is not also wrong to compel them to support teaching which impugns the creed in which they do believe. Jefferson had insisted [in his “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” (1779)] that the people should not have to pay for the teaching of Anglicanism. Mr. Bryan asked why they should be made to pay for the teaching of agnosticism.

Science, as such, does not have quite the same legal status. Religion also, of course, has special importance for those who have religious commitments. That is part of the reason why it has a legal protection that mere scientific and historical claims — about the theory of relativity, for example, or about the justice of the bombing of Hiroshima or about the wisdom of launching the Warsaw Uprising — lack. Insistence on the religious import of the theory of evolution will, if anyone believes P2, give rise to deep and intractable political and legal fights that it would be better for all concerned to avoid.

The evolutionist-philosophizers are not the only ones to blame for the continued resistance to evolutionary biology, but, for the reasons stated, they are a part of the problem and they deserve a share of the blame for causing (or provoking) the resistance for which they profess so much dislike.

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