

“In God we trust?”
The Battle between Evolution and Intelligent Design

Where has God, or spirituality, gone in the United States? Religion is an important part of the world. It influences people in the way they talk, act, and engage with others. To know the world, one must know religion. However, today we are taking spirituality out of our courts, our public buildings, and eliminating any talk of religion from our schools. Education has gone through a transforming process of secularization, separating public schools from any religious ideas. In the U.S., prayers and readings of religious texts have been taken out of the schools, and today the argument continues over evolution and intelligent design. This process of secularization seen throughout the history of the U.S. educational system has been influenced and motivated by the legal process, grassroots organizers (specifically parents), and the media.

Religion has played a significant role in the U.S. education system. Until the late 19th century, creationism was taught in nearly all schools through a literal interpretation of the Bible. With the acceptance of the theory of evolution in the 1860's along with developments in other sciences “public schools began to teach science that was reconciled with Christianity by most people” (“Creation and Evolution”). After World War I, the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy brought strong opposition to the theory of evolution, which led to legislation that prohibited the teaching of this subject. In 1925, John T. Scopes, a Tennessee teacher that taught evolution in defiance, and the American Civil Liberties Union brought a case against this legislation, which became known as the Scopes Monkey Trial. Scopes was convicted, but the publicity from the media encouraged supporters of evolution to take a stand. Scopes was convicted for his lessons, but this was quickly overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court; however, the legislation was not declared unconstitutional by the court. The court stated:

We are not able to see how the prohibition of teaching the theory that man has descended from a lower order of animals gives preference to any religious establishment or mode of worship. So far as we know, there is no religious establishment or organized body that has in its creed or confession of faith any article denying or affirming such a theory. *Scopes v. State* 289 S.W. 363, 367 (Tenn. 1927) (“Creation and Evolution”).

The teaching of evolution remained illegal in Tennessee because the interpretation of the First Amendment was that “Congress could not establish a particular religion as the State religion” (“Creation and Evolution”). Since the legislation did not establish one religion as the “State religion” it was not unconstitutional.

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states that Congress should make no law “respecting an establishment of religion” or prohibit the free exercise of religion (“First Amendment”). The interpretation of the First Amendment by the legal system, schools, and the public has been extremely important in the impact that religion and specific science curriculum has had on the U.S. education system. The amendment’s interpretation has changed since the *Scopes Monkey Trial* and this has had a significant impact on legislation and the separation of church and state.

Lemon v. Kurtzman was a vital case in U.S. history that helped to define the First Amendment and religion’s role in education. In 1968, Pennsylvania’s Nonpublic Elementary and Secondary Education Act allowed the state Superintendent of Public Instruction to reimburse nonpublic schools (most of which were Catholic) for teachers’ salaries, textbooks and instructional materials (“*Edwards*” - *U.S. Supreme Court*). Therefore, Pennsylvania provided continuing financial aid directly to the church-related schools. In 1971, the Supreme Court ruled this act to be in violation of the Establishment clause in the First Amendment with an 8-1 decision. The Court's decision in this case established the “Lemon test”, which defines the requirements for legislation concerning religion. It consists of three rules:

1. The government's action must have a secular legislative purpose;
2. The government's action must not have the primary effect of either advancing or inhibiting religion;
3. The government's action must not result in an "excessive government entanglement" with religion ("Lemon" - *Wikipedia*).

"If any of these 3 rules is violated, the government's action is deemed unconstitutional under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution" ("Lemon" - *Wikipedia*). *Lemon v. Kurtzman* helped to define the First Amendment and the role it would play in the battle between religion and education in the future.

Another important case, *Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, occurred in 1963 and "is vilified as one that 'kicked God and prayer out of the schools'" (Corbett 1). During this time, Pennsylvania had statutes that called "for the daily reading of a chapter from the Bible and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in that state's tax-funded schools" (2). Edward Schempp was a parent in the Abington Township School District and a Unitarian that disagreed with the promotion of Christianity at state expense. During this time, five states had statutes compelling schools to perform Bible readings, while twenty-five states had laws allowing optional Bible reading. "Schempp's complaint alleged the state-sponsored Bible reading and accompanying recitation of the Lord's Prayer were unconstitutional establishments of religion which prohibited the free exercise thereof for both him and his children" (2). On the other hand, the defense contended "that such reading was an invaluable aid in the development of the minds and morals of school children that the State had a constitutional right to employ" (2). The defense also argued that the Bible was not an inherently religious work. However, the Court did not believe this implicit claim. The US District Court of Pennsylvania said, "The Bible is essentially a religious work...The daily reading of the Bible...can hardly do less than inculcate...various religious doctrines in childish minds" (3). Furthermore, "the bench was equally unconvinced of

any true freedom enjoyed by the children to interpret the Bible readings as they saw fit” (3). The Supreme Court handed down a controversial 8-1 decision in favor of *Schempp* declaring school sponsored Bible reading and prayer in public schools to be unconstitutional (1).

The media and the public were divided in their reaction to the Court’s decision. Newspapers were found to be either critical or supportive. The Washington *Evening Star* declared that “God and religion have all but been driven from the public schools. What remains? Will the baccalaureate service and Christmas carols be the next to go?” (6). In contrast, the *New York Times* was more supportive of the Court’s decision. The view of Christian denominations was also diverse. Figures such as Reverend Dr. Billy Graham were in outright disagreement, while others were less critical. Congress responded immediately by proposing bills to overturn the decision by amending the Constitution. “By April 1964, over one hundred-fifty such amendments had been proposed” (6). Colbert explains that this strong reaction from Congress, school districts, parents, and concerned religious groups was brought on by an erroneous belief that *Abington v. Schempp* prohibited such religious activity, “when in reality it merely restrained the government from interfering either to promote or prohibit such activity” (7). The reaction of Congress shows the impact that its constituents – parents, religious groups, schools – have on their actions.

Louisiana’s “Balanced Treatment for Creation-Science and Evolution-Science in Public School Instruction Act” brought about another essential case that would help to define the First Amendment and religions role in schools. “The ‘Creationism Act’ forbids the teaching of the theory of evolution in public elementary and secondary schools unless accompanied by instruction in the theory of ‘creation science.’ The Act does not require the teaching of either theory unless the other is taught” (“Edwards” - *Wikipedia*). The act was made into law through

aggressive lobbying by Creationists. The case, known as *Edwards v. Aguillard*, was decided by the Supreme Court in 1987. The Court ruled with a 7-2 decision, using the Lemon test, that the Louisiana act was unconstitutional and in violation of the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment. The majority of the Court argued the following:

The Act does not further its stated secular purpose of “protecting academic freedom.” It does not enhance the freedom of teachers to teach what they choose, and fails to further the goal of “teaching all of the evidence.” Forbidding the teaching of evolution when creation science is not also taught undermines the provision of a comprehensive scientific education... Instead, this Act has the distinctly different purpose of discrediting evolution by counterbalancing its teaching at every turn with the teaching of creationism. The Act impermissibly endorses religion by advancing the religious belief that a supernatural being created humankind (“Edwards” – *US Supreme Court*).

The ruling effectively removed creationism from public schools. Although the ruling only impacted state schools and not others, it had a great effect on the creationist movement. Within two years of the decision a Creationist textbook was written, *Of Pandas and People*, which attacked evolutionary biology. In the 1990s the Creationism movement changed to be known as the Intelligent Design movement, which would lead to further community action and further legal action involving U.S. education (“Edwards” - *Wikipedia*).

In more recent years, the controversy between religion and education in the U.S. has been over the “factual” teaching of the theory of evolution. The argument has been over the content that students are exposed to and the lack of other teachings about the beginning of life. Different school districts, parents, and teachers have supported the teaching of “intelligent design” along with the curriculum on evolution. “The theory of intelligent design holds that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection” (Discovery Institute). The Dover Area School District in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania required students in biology classes to be made aware of “intelligent design” as an alternative to the theory of evolution. Questions about the statement and questions

related to “intelligent design” could not be addressed in the classroom and were encouraged to be discussed at home. “A federal lawsuit was filed against the Dover School District on behalf of 8 families by the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State...The two groups allege intelligent design is merely a secular variation of creationism, the biblical-based view that regards God as the creator of life” (Kuehnel 2). Their argument claims that the district’s action violated the constitutional separation of church and state.

The questions that the Court addressed are the following: “Is the school district simply making kids aware of an ‘alternative scientific view,’ as the school board contends? Or do the four paragraphs undermine science education and unconstitutionally advance religion?” (Haynes). The court ruled that a teaching, or even statement, about intelligent design was unconstitutional under the first amendment. Judge Jones went even further in his ruling, finding that intelligent design was not science: “It is our view that a reasonable, objective observer would, after reviewing both the voluminous record in this case, and our narrative, reach the inescapable conclusion that ID is an interesting theological argument, but that it is not science” (Evolution and Creation). The Discovery Institute, the leading proponent of the idea of intelligent design, probably wishes this trial had never happened. Discovery wants schools to raise questions about evolutionary theory, but not mandate (at least not yet) that intelligent design be mentioned as a “scientific alternative.” A loss in court that labels intelligent design “religious” can result in devastating effects to the movement for intelligent design (Haynes).

Social change within the Dover Area School District occurred because of the organizing efforts of parents and the legal action that they pursued. Eight parents came together to challenge the school district and through their passion and the legal process that they pursued

they were able to create change for their children. This change not only impacted their school district and their children, but every school district across the United States.

A similar case occurred in 2002 in Georgia between the Cobb County Board of Education and a group of parents involving the teaching of evolution. Two thousand parents in the school district complained and organized against the factual representation of evolution taught to their children. In response, the school board placed stickers addressing evolution in all of the science books. The sticker said the following, “This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully and critically considered” (“Judge”). In response to the sticker, 6 parents, along with the American Civil Liberties Union, sued the Cobb County Board of Education. In January 2005, Judge Clarence Cooper ruled that the stickers were unconstitutional and that they be removed from all science textbooks. An agreement was reached when the school district agreed not to attempt to place similar stickers in textbooks again and when the plaintiffs agreed to end all legal action against the school district (“Agreement”).

The court cases over the past few years have resulted in several consequences for school districts. School districts have had to pay the costs of defending their stance in legal action. For example, the Cobb County School District had to pay \$166,659 for a portion of the plaintiff’s legal fees on top of their own legal fees (“Agreement”). These legal actions divert funds that the district could be using for the education of their students. Furthermore, tax-payers and voters may see this as irresponsible and a burden on their tax money.

One problem that parents and school districts have with the teaching of evolution is the way it is defined. According to the Discovery Institute, a conservative Christian group active in

the evolution debate (but not supportive of the teaching of intelligent design), evolution in science textbooks has six principal meanings:

1. Change over time; history of nature; any sequence of events in nature.
2. Changes in the frequencies of alleles in the gene pool of a population.
3. Limited common descent: the idea that particular groups of organisms have descended from a common ancestor.
4. The mechanisms responsible for the change required to produce limited descent with modification, chiefly natural selection acting on random variations or mutations.
5. Universal common descent: the idea that all organisms have descended from a single common ancestor.
6. “Blind watchmaker” thesis: the idea that all organisms have descended from common ancestors solely through an unguided, unintelligent, purposeless, material processes such as natural selection acting on random variations or mutations; that the mechanisms of natural selection, random variation and mutation, and perhaps other similarly naturalistic mechanisms, are completely sufficient to account for the appearance of design in living organisms (Meyer 136).

Controversy develops when scientists, teachers, and students try to evaluate evolution in the 5th or 6th sense of the term. “At present, many public policy (and other) statements about how to teach evolution lapse uncritically into describing evolution (that is, universal common descent) as a fact” (Meyer 140). This causes problems for students because they are not given the information in a way to think critically about evolution and the origin of life. Furthermore, this causes problems for parents because this kind of teaching influences the beliefs and values that they want for their children.

The other problem with defining evolution is by saying it is “just a theory.” Defining evolution with these words “insinuates that evolution does not have widespread acceptance amongst scientists, promoting the teaching of alternative pseudosciences such as intelligent design, and completely ignoring evolution in biology classes” (“Creation and Evolution”). In general, these controversies with the teaching of evolution have resulted in Federal and state court actions, such as those in the Dover Area School District and in Cobb County, which are usually brought about by parents opposed to any religious teaching in schools. There needs to be

a balance in the teaching of evolution that does not undermine or discredit one's religious beliefs, but that also clearly represents the subject of evolution. The Discovery Institute and Phillip E. Johnson, support the policy of "Teach the Controversy", which entails presenting to students evidence for and against evolution, and then encouraging students to evaluate that evidence themselves.

The grassroots efforts for intelligent design have continued to strive to impact the teaching of evolution and the science curriculum in the education system. Many proponents of intelligent design desire to greatly undermine or eliminate the teaching of evolution in public schools. However, opponents argue that intelligent design and teaching of the supernatural is not scientific and has no place in schools. Philip E. Johnson, a leader in the intelligent design movement, says, "Darwinian evolution is not primarily important as a scientific theory but as a culturally dominant creation story...When there is radical disagreement in a commonwealth about the creation story, the stage is set for intense conflict, the kind...known as 'culture war'" ("Intelligent Design"). This 'culture war' has encouraged many to be involved and to organize on both sides of the battle. Many Christians, religious believers, and other intelligent design supporters have started organizations (such as the Discovery Institute), written books and documents, lobbied to their politicians, and held conferences on the subject. These efforts have caused school districts and politicians to take action, but they have not created the desired results.

Despite grassroots efforts by supporters of intelligent design, the organizing efforts by parents against intelligent design and the impact of the legal system have led to significant social change in U.S. education. From *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* to the Dover Area School District case, parents have been active in their fight for change and they have been

winning the fight. Though there has been opposition against them, they have found success because of their use of the legal system. Through their efforts they have forced the Court to clearly define the First Amendment and they have caused sweeping change that is impacting the entire United States. Their success shows that grassroots activists working through the legal system can impact the political process to bring about social change.

Do I agree with the direction our education has been heading in regards to evolution? No, because I do not think that evolution is clearly defined for students to make their own opinions about the origin of life. There needs to be a strict, unbiased curriculum that does not influence or persuade the minds of students. My Uncle Bud grew up in a Christian household, but he was negatively impacted by his teacher in school. His teacher held a piece of chalk in the air and said, "If there is a God, he won't let this chalk break." Upon dropping it, the chalk broke on the ground. The teacher's own beliefs and ideas turned my uncle against religion and caused him to become an atheist. I believe that the way evolution is defined and portrayed to students can also impact the way they view spirituality and the existence of god(s). This is not only a Christian argument, which it is often made out to be (because they are the strongest protesting voices). The way this subject is taught affects Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Baha'ism, and all religions. I think it would be beneficial to students to know the flaws and specific evidence for evolution (especially the 5th and 6th definitions), but also to know that there are alternatives to evolution and the origin of life.

My fear is that we are pushing God and spirituality out of every part of our lives. Even here at the University of Michigan religion has been replaced. It is no longer offered as a major that one can pursue. People argue that "religion is private" ("The Case Against School Prayer). This has become true in our country. To many, religion has become a private matter that is not

discussed and that is not a part of our everyday lives. However, I don't think religion is meant to be private. We learn about other subjects, like evolution, by discussing it with each other and by wrestling with questions that we don't understand. I think all people ask themselves, "What's my purpose? Was I created? Is there more to life on this Earth?" I believe that this is the most important question that we need to ask ourselves, "Is there a God, or higher power?" I believe that we cannot answer this question, or the other ones alone, and I don't think that we were meant to answer them alone. Unfortunately, I think the current education system answers this question for students without allowing them to think critically about other possibilities. Does this mean I think evolution should not be taught? No. However, I do think that evolution and any of its flaws need to be clearly defined for students, which will allow them to develop their own foundation on the origin of life. For this to happen people, especially parents and students, will need to organize and work through the courts and the media to impact the political process and bring about social change.

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