

EVOLUTION: STILL TERRIFYING RELIGIONISTS AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Turkey has made international headlines by deciding that the theory of natural selection may no longer be taught in the nation's schools. Numan Kurtulmus, the country's deputy prime minister, an economics professor and an influential member of the nation's leading political party, called the well-established theory "outdated and rotten." Furthermore, he expressed the idea that schoolchildren do not have the critical thinking skills to handle such an idea that challenges their deeply cherished religious worldview.

It evidently does not occur to Kurtulmus that it is the job of the educational system to teach children critical thinking skills. He seems to be more interested in religious indoctrination than genuine education.

Writing in his introduction to *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*, the late Christopher Hitchens related: "By trying to adjust to the findings that it once tried so viciously to ban and repress, religion has only succeeded in restating the same questions that undermined it in earlier epochs." (p. xviii) For example, religionists are still grappling with how a designer or creator could have implemented something as cruel, slow and wasteful as evolution. And why do species have to devour one another to survive?

However, as the move in Turkey shows, many religionists are still able and willing to ban and repress the findings of science. They never learn! In the U.S., many states are still grappling with the "controversy" over teaching evolution in the public schools.

The position in Turkey further shows how futile it is to promote the late Stephen Jay Gould's idea of non-overlapping magisteria, or the idea that science and religion occupy separate realms and deal with different questions. At the center of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the idea that God created all life on Earth and that he created the universe. Who can seriously argue that science has nothing to say about these questions, or that religion does not deal with the origins of life and the universe as we know it?

There was a time when religion was able to ban and suppress good science and terrorize people into refraining from critiques of religious ideas. At no time was this more apparent than the aptly named Dark Ages. However, now that it is not as easy to ban and repress scientific findings as it once was, religionists, like penicillin-resistant bacteria, have learned to adapt. Many of them once said, “if God wanted man to fly, he would have given him wings.” Now they consider airplane travel to be a gift from God. They now embrace medical progress they once opposed. Many of them now accept evolution but claim it is guided by God. They now accept the Big Bang theory but maintain that God must have started it all. They even go so far as to come up with highly imaginative and fanciful biblical “interpretations” to argue their case. Moreover, as science advances, religion becomes more about symbols and metaphor, not to be taken literally.

Opposition to evolution fits perfectly into President Trump’s anti-intellectual and anti-scientific worldview – “alternative facts” and all. When the so-called leader of the so-called free world scares scientists to death and embraces paranoid conspiracy theories, the world is in *serious* trouble.

What can be done to combat this madness? People have already started taking a strong stand in defense of good science. In April 2017 the march for science in Washington, DC drew thousands of people. Similar marches were held in Boston, New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other U.S. cities. These marches were mostly non-partisan, and that is as it should be.

The National Center for Science Education has done great work to enlighten the public about the importance of evolutionary theory and the threats to good science posed by creationists and Intelligent Design proponents. In the 1990s the NCSE came out with *Voices for Evolution*, with contributions from secular groups like African Americans for Humanism, as well as influential religious groups. Perhaps it is time for another major statement, preferably one signed by Nobel laureates and celebrities, as well.

All of this opposition to the teaching of evolution (and the acceptance of Intelligent Design) raises another important question: If we are to be discouraged from identifying pro-religious pseudoscience, what other critiques of pseudoscience should we shy away from? This question is a matter of life and death, because due to climate change, conservative religion could now be a major

contributing factor to the end of all life on Earth. However, if we have the courage to fight against deeply cherished religiously supported pseudoscience, we will have the courage fight the kind of pseudoscience that could do all of us the most harm.