

Should we teach creationism in schools? Yes, in history class

February 6 2014, by Jeremy Pritchard



We don't like human meat, said dino. Credit: davidberkowitz

Despite lack of evidence or logic, some people would like kids to be taught as fact that the Earth was created by a supernatural being some 6,000 years ago. That is the case put forth by Christian Schools' Trust, as it was [revealed](#) that 40 independent schools in the UK teach creationism. While that is a tiny proportion of the total schools in the country, the fact that some still teach creationism in science classes should be a worry.

These revelations come at a time when, across the Atlantic Ocean, last night US science communicator Bill Nye participated in a [debate](#) with Ken Ham, the president of the Creation Museum. While the debate

proceeded without fistfights, scientists like University of Chicago's Jerry Coyne think this was a [bad idea](#).

America v Britain

As a biology teacher, I find it strange that the US, a secular society, has issues with the teaching of [creationism](#) as fact while the UK, which does not have a formal separation between church and state, does not. The Pilgrim Fathers' experience of religious persecution led to the development of a society in the US where legislation explicitly separates the potentially explosive combination of science and religion by excluding religion from state education.

Ever since the [Scopes trial](#), American creationists have tried to overcome this barrier. Recent examples include suggesting that the reincarnation of 19th century intelligent design is in fact a science. They argue it is impossible for the complexity of organisms to have been the result of evolutionary processes. Those promoting this "science" of irreducible complexity have not yet convinced the US legal system that their "science" is little more than a Trojan horse containing creationism.

Complexity is a constant theme in attacks on evolution, how can the random processes of evolution lead to a complex organ such as an eye? Random mutation on its own cannot achieve this. But the simple beauty of evolution is that, while [random mutation](#) is a core component, it is useless without the creative power of natural selection, or as Darwin preferred to call it, differential survival. If a mutation gives you a characteristic that makes it less likely you will die and more likely to survive to reproduce, then through your offspring the frequency of that mutation will spread in the population.

British sensibility?

While the Christian Schools' Trust said they teach creationism and evolution in a "balanced way", the Department of Education was firm in its [response](#):

There is no question of state-funded schools ever being allowed to teach creationism. But independent religious schools are entitled to teach their religion's world view. Only countries like North Korea ban the teaching of religion in schools.

This is perhaps why creationism has not been the constant irritation to UK educators as it continues to be for US educators. Another reason may be that in UK schools students sit for religious education and science lessons sometimes on the same day, mirroring the separation of faith and evidence espoused by religious philosophers like Thomas Aquinas. In such cases, religious belief and rational scientific analysis can be held side by side, each apportioned to its appropriate place. Many scientists are devout evolutionists and also seriously religious.

Should creationism be taught at all in the UK? Not as scientific fact, certainly. It was a heresy in the early Christian church to consider the Genesis story as literally true, instead it was part of the rich allegorical tradition of the time and should be read as such.

So yes, you can teach creationism in history and religious education classes but not in [science classes](#). To do so would undermine scientific endeavour and inquisitiveness. The biosciences, riding high on a wave of the astounding molecular discoveries and techniques of recent years, are integrating our understanding of the whole natural world from ecosystems to viruses. This understanding and the new opportunities it brings are timely given global threats like climate change.

Nature as it really is

The patterns that weave through the [natural world](#) scream of evolution, extinctions, diseases and dead-ends, but also of intriguing solutions and wonderful designs from molecular motors to the efficiency of bird flight. These were not created but thrown together from a rag bag of historical left overs to ensure that the possessor was not perfect, but the best, the fittest, at that time and that place. There is no direction, no progression, no perfection but instead a wonderfully simple process as each generation runs as fast as it can to stay ahead of competition, predators and pathogens. Evolution may be going nowhere but it is better to travel in hope than to arrive.

Would it matter if creationism was taught as fact and evolution as a mere theory? Yes. How can a doctor or psychologist understand how to treat a condition when its roots are millions of years in the past? A creationist view allows supernatural intervention and the scientific process cannot work with that possibility. How can we overcome the daunting challenges that face us as a species if education produces "scientists" who lack the evolutionary vision that will help provide medical cure they seek, the plant nutrition they try to improve or the threatened species they try to conserve? In short, we need all the help we can get.

Science with an evolutionary context has, and can, continue to deliver solutions. Scripture-driven creationism cannot.

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Citation: Should we teach creationism in schools? Yes, in history class (2014, February 6) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-02-creationism-schools-history-class.html>

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