Christian Opposition to Evolution in the United States

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Wyoming’s controversy over the Next Generation Science Standards for K-12 instruction is not surprising. Opposition to evolution is not new but stems from a widespread theological hostility to evolution within evangelical Christianity. In recent decades, that antagonism has been expressed politically. Legislatures in nearly every state have passed laws addressing the teaching of evolution in schools.

This evangelical political activity has had no effect on evolution as the foundation of modern biology, geology and other sciences. Indeed, it has gone almost unnoticed by the scientific community. Modern medicine continues to be founded upon evolutionary biology, and everyone who seeks medical assistance trusts evolution whenever he or she visits a doctor -- even for a flu shot.

The place where anti-evolution activity has had the most impact is within the evangelical community itself. In particular, it has changed the interpretation of Genesis’s account of creation, and thereby altered the perception of God’s role.

When the Fundamentalist movement in the early 20th century decided to combat evolution, there was a broad range of beliefs about how to understand the way “God created the heaven and the earth” in six days. Today, the only accepted meaning in evangelical circles is that a day for God at creation was a 24-hour period, creation took only six of these days, and that creation took place just over 6,000 years ago, as argued by Bishop Ussher. How did this change come about?

When Charles Darwin published “The Origin of the Species” in 1859, the work became a symbol of scientific change. In England, it became a touchstone in a heated public debate between biblical views of creation and evolution.

In 19th century America, Darwin and evolution were comparatively uncontroversial. American Christians at the time largely accepted scientific change and usually believed it explained details of God’s creation rather than attacked biblically based beliefs.

Even during the rise of Fundamentalism’s opposition to evolution in the early 1900s, much of that attitude remained. William Jennings Bryan -- who was a fervent evolution opponent, an ardent Fundamentalist and a three-time presidential candidate -- expressed a common belief when he testified at the 1925 Scopes trial over the teaching of evolution.

Citing Genesis 2:4, where the word “day” refers to the entire time of creation, he indicated that “day” did not necessarily mean a “24-hour day.” In the trial’s transcripts Bryan further stated, “It would be just as easy for the kind of God we believe in to make the earth in six days as in six years or in 6 million years or in 600 million years. I do not think it important whether we believe one or the other.”

The problem was that Bryan’s statement reflected 19th-century religious views that enabled a fit between evolution and belief in Genesis 1. If a day can be a “period,” then the biblical account of creation can speak of geological periods of millions of years. Despite his opposition to evolution, Bryan’s widely reported statement actually revealed compatibility between the two views.

It was not until several decades later that John Whitcomb and Henry Morris presented an alternative approach in their 1961 book, “The Genesis Flood.” One innovation was to introduce the Seventh Day Adventist belief in a six-day creation of 24 hours each as the obvious understanding of Genesis 1.

They further argued that the petrified bones and shells in the geological strata were put there during Noah’s flood.

Whitcomb’s and Morris’s insistence on their interpretation as the sole way to understand Genesis 1 was controversial at first because it did not allow for past evangelical beliefs. But its adoption was boosted by the newly formed Creation Research Society.

The Creation Research Society was founded by leaders representing the wide range of evangelical perspectives on Genesis’s creation story. By the 1970s, however, all who did not support the idea of a 24-hour day had been removed, and the society worked tirelessly to promote belief in the six-day, 24-hour creation and the 6,000-year-old Earth.

Today, decades after Whitcomb’s and Morris’s book introduced belief in a creation of six 24-hour days, evangelicalism has adopted it wholesale. Those still adhering to the old approach of each day of creation being a long “period” are seen as compromising with modern science, even though their view is older than the concept of evolution itself. Truly, anti-evolutionism has wrought a change within evangelicalism.