

Great Disputations: Truth, Power, and the War Over Darwin

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In October, 2004, the school board of Dover Township, Pennsylvania made headlines when it ordered high school teachers to read a four-paragraph disclaimer to their science students at the beginning of their unit on evolution. Actually, it was something more than a disclaimer. After noting that Darwin's theory is not a fact (and that it is riddled with "gaps"), it commended their attention to *Of Pandas and People* (a "supplementary text" packaged by the Foundation for Thought and Ethics, a Texas-based think tank which had formerly characterized its mission as "proclaiming, publishing, preaching [and] teaching...the Christian Gospel," but that now describes itself as working to "restore the freedom to know to young people in the classroom"—specifically, to know about the Theory of Intelligent Design).

Outraged teachers refused to comply; assisted by the ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, eleven parents brought suit. The school board secured the services of The Thomas More Law Center, a "law firm dedicated to the defense and promotion of the religious freedom of Christians" and, starting in September of 2005, a veritable parade of PhDs marched into the federal courthouse in Harrisburg to argue the pros and cons of Darwin.

Latter-day H.L. Menckens from around the world covered the spectacle; President George W. Bush, ever mindful of his faith-based constituency, cautiously signaled his support for the defendants. Last November, in a dramatic turn of events, Dover's voters

sent an unmistakable signal of their sympathies when they swept most of the members of its school board out of office. “I’d like to say to the good citizens of Dover,” televangelist Pat Robertson thundered, “If there is a disaster in your area, don’t turn to God, you just rejected Him from your city.” Shortly before Christmas, Judge John E. Jones III, a conservative Republican, released a scathing, 139-page opinion that added the force of law to the people’s mandate: Intelligent Design, he declared, is not science—it is Biblical Creationism by another name. And no matter how artfully packaged or re-branded, religion has no place in the science curriculum of a public school.

Score one for the forces of reason, but the war is hardly over. More than eight decades have passed since the Scopes trial made a monkey out of William Jennings Bryan, but if flappers and bathtub gin are distant memories, the fight over evolution continues apace. Undaunted by the debacle in Dover, Missouri state representatives recently introduced legislation mandating equal time for Intelligent Design and Darwin; litigation on the same issue is proceeding in school districts in California and Georgia. Scientists have discovered penicillin, split the atom, and decoded the genome, but they’re still being summoned to courthouses to defend a bedrock tenet of biology. How can that be?

Perhaps one reason is the public’s persistent misapprehension of what really happened at the Scopes trial, which was hardly the watershed event that Hollywood made it out to be. Though Spencer Tracy triumphed over obscurantism in *Inherit the Wind*, in real life Clarence Darrow lost the case, which was adjudicated on the narrow question of whether it violated Tennessee state law to teach evolution, which it undoubtedly did (Tennessee’s so called “Monkey Law,” which proscribed teaching “any theory that

denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible,” was only repealed in 1967). It wasn’t until 1968 that the United States Supreme Court weighed in, declaring, in *Epperson v. Arkansas*, that:

Government in our democracy, state and national, must be neutral in matters of religious theory, doctrine, and practice. . . . The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.

The courts haven’t so much endorsed Darwinism in subsequent decisions as denied equal stature to Creationism—not because it is factually wrong, but because it is a tenet of a particular religious tradition. Some school administrators, in a gesture of fairness, might choose to forbid their teachers from teaching either Darwin or Creationism, but that would be an abridgement of freedom of speech, which the same amendment guarantees.

If the evidence for evolution is so overwhelming, why do so many of us remain unconvinced? One explanation can be found in the tenets of some of America’s homegrown Protestant movements, in particular, the Fundamentalist branch of Evangelicalism, which regards the Bible as inerrant and literally true. But not all anti-evolutionists are Fundamentalists. A recent Gallup poll revealed that a plurality of the American population (about 44%) believe in the Biblical account of Creation—double the percentage who describe themselves as Fundamentalists. Some 39% of Americans embrace the Deistic view that God works through evolution; only about 10% subscribe to a purely naturalistic view of the origins of life.

But why do these believing non-believers stop at evolution? Why aren’t they equally skeptical about string theory and materials science and genetics? For one thing, the Theory of Evolution, unlike most modern scientific theories, isn’t all that esoteric—

you can describe it in words instead of mathematical formulas. As complicated as evolutionary biology may be in practice, its basic principles sound almost like a story in the telling. And true stories, filled with digressions, dead ends, and red herrings as they are, quite often seem stranger (and are certainly more boring to read) than well-wrought works of fiction.

While the Bible offers a seamless narrative about man's fall and salvation, full of pathos and spiritual uplift, and with a definite beginning, middle, and end, evolution gives us serendipitous accidents, beginning with a mysterious primal soup and ending with the rise of hairless primates. The Christian Bible features a Creator who is not only intelligent, but also benign and supremely self-sacrificing; to the extent that the scientists' story suggests a moral at all ("only the fittest survive"), it doesn't offer much comfort to the afflicted. While science merely describes, religion prescribes—it offers guidance and hope.

So-called Creation Science and Intelligent Design may fall short intellectually—their risible "proofs" that Noah's flood really happened, that dinosaurs and men once shared the earth, that eyes and wings and cells are self-evidently engineered, do little credit to either science or religion—but they restore a tangible moral dimension to the world. But surely it's not reasonable to compare ancient myths to objective science. The propositions of myths reflect a culture's deepest fears and longings; scientific theories are a product of disinterested observation. Myths are timeless and laden with emotion; when a scientific theory is falsified, its proponents dispassionately discard it. Or do they? What if science, grounded as it is in an uncritical faith in positivism and the scriptural authority of its prophets (Newton, Einstein, Darwin), is no less arbitrary a system of beliefs than

any other revealed religion's? Not just cutting-edge deconstructionists and fuzzy-headed relativists but a new breed of Christian polemicists have posed exactly that question; in fact it is the wedge that the most rhetorically sophisticated of the anti-evolutionists mean to drive into the First Amendment. If secular humanism and Biblical Christianity are competing ideologies, they ask, then why does the Constitution privilege one of them over the other? It is tempting to dismiss their argument as mere sophistry, but as a proponent of both science and faith, it gives me pause.

Since I am a secular Jew, I benefit doubly from the separation between church and state. At the same time, while I deeply distrust their motives and generally deplore their politics, I can empathize with the dismay with which anti-evolutionists must regard their marginalization. Jews know what it's like to be "out of the mainstream," to be ridiculed and reviled as stubborn relics. And I can acknowledge (if not quite admire) their quixotic persistence. We Jews pride ourselves on our fealty to what *should* be, rather than what is—no matter how bleak our circumstances, we have always put our faith in an invisible God and an indefinitely postponed destiny.

With its circus-like atmosphere, its heated passions, and its uneven playing field, the debate over Darwin reminds me in some ways of a famous medieval media event, the Disputation of Barcelona. A formal debate convened by King James I of Aragon in 1263, the question at issue was whether or not Jewish writings in the Tanakh and the Talmud prove that Jesus is the Messiah. The disputants were Paul Christian (also known as Pablo Christiani), a converted Jew who had become a Dominican Friar, and the chief rabbi of Gerona, Moses ben Nahman (better known as Nachmanides or the Ramban). A towering figure of Medieval Judaism, Nachmanides was a Kabbalist and one of the first Zionists

(he lived out his last years in Palestine; his departure from Spain most likely a direct consequence of the Disputation). His books on Jewish law or *halakhah* are still studied today.

Two strikingly different accounts of the Disputation have come down to us, one written in church Latin, the other in Hebrew. Reading them today is a little like watching the movie *Rashoman*. Though they purport to describe the same event, they couldn't be more different. The Latin version is devastating to Nachmanides. When Christiani confronted him with the texts, the anonymous chronicler wrote, he was at first reduced to a baffled silence. Finally, in an act of obvious desperation, Nachmanides repudiated the "ancient and authoritative" Jewish writings that had so manifestly betrayed him, blasphemously dismissing them as mere "sermons in which their teachers often lied." Derided by Christians and Jews alike, the humiliated rabbi secretly fled the city, forfeiting the debate before it was officially concluded.

In the Hebrew account, written in the first person by Nachmanides himself, the rabbi makes mincemeat of his apostate opponent. If "the sages of the Talmud believed in Jesus as the messiah," he asked sardonically, "Why did they not convert and turn to the faith of Jesus... as Friar Paul, who understands their teachings better than they themselves do?" Nachmanides claimed to have won the begrudging approbation of the Christian monarch himself, who declared, "I have never seen a man whose case is wrong argue it as well as you have done."

Just as in the contemporary debate over Darwin, the two sides were divided by an unbridgeable epistemological gulf—each invoked authorities that had no probative value to the other. Beleaguered scientists may point to the ever-burgeoning body of physical

evidence that supports Darwin, but their adversaries are unswayed; they put their faith in “the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews, 11:1). Paleontologists speculate about the origins of dry bones; when Fundamentalists behold those same artifacts, the question they ask is “Can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37-3). Although scientists and Creationists both claim to be talking about the past, most anti-evolutionists are really looking ahead—to the Apocalypse and the Second Coming. To admit as much as a single doubt about the scriptures’ version of the past, they fear, is to jeopardize their devoutly anticipated future. The scientists and their adversaries might as well be speaking two different languages—perhaps Latin and Hebrew.

Christians’ typological exegeses of the Tanakh meant nothing to Nachmanides, who didn’t believe in the Gospels they supposedly foretold. Only twenty years before the Disputation took place, another Jewish convert, Nicholas Donin, had convinced the authorities of Paris that the Talmud was so inimical to Christianity that they’d seized the sacred books by the cartload and burned them. Christians, apparently oblivious of the irony, triumphantly adduced proof of Jesus’s divinity from those same anti-Christian pages.

So who was telling the truth—the rabbi or the anonymous chronicler? Who won the debate? Not long ago, during a visit to Barcelona, I found myself pondering that question. Walking through the narrow streets of its medieval Jewish quarter, peering into the recently restored rooms of its oldest synagogue, I realized that history had already provided the answer. In 1391, anti-Jewish riots broke out across Spain. Although the local authorities permitted the Jews of Barcelona to take refuge in a tower, every last one of them was eventually converted, murdered, or driven from the city. In 1413, rabbis

were summoned from Gerona to Tortosa to participate in another Disputation, which lasted for more than a year. Afterwards, the “Antipope” Benedict XIII (whose authority was recognized in Spain) issued a bull banning the Talmud. In 1492, the Jews were expelled from Spain.

The Disputations were show trials—their winners were foreordained. The ground rules of the debate in Barcelona explicitly forbade Nachmanides to call into question “the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ—which because of its certitude cannot be placed in doubt.” That he was able to say anything at all under the circumstances attests to his verbal prowess; it also suggests how high the stakes really were. The real issue, after all, was not truth but power. When persuasion failed, Nachmanides’ opponents could—and did—resort to the Inquisition.

When the Danbury Baptist Association wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1801, complaining that the laws of Connecticut begrudged them “what religious privileges we enjoy. . . . as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights,” Jefferson replied in no uncertain terms:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state.

With their tenured academic positions and their densely footnoted publications that legalistically elide any mention of God, the most persuasive advocates of Intelligent Design strike a convincing pose: they seem more modest and open-minded than their secularist adversaries. Fundamentalist anti-Evolutionists style themselves as modern day

Jews in Babylon, persecuted and beleaguered by a Godless state. But make no mistake about it: their ultimate agenda is to undermine the First Amendment, not just to breach the boundary between religion and state but to assume many of its prerogatives for themselves. Fortunately for the rest of us, the Disputation in Dover set them back.

If Americans are too religious to summon up much enthusiasm for Darwin (according to a recent poll, some 60% of the public agrees that Intelligent Design should be taught alongside evolution), they should be that much more ardent to preserve their freedom to worship as they see fit. If the next disputation ends differently, all of us will suffer. Theocracy isn't just bad for science—it's bad for religion too.