

Defending Darwinism: How Far is Too Far?

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Controversy over creation and evolution has long been a part of the American political landscape. Recently, however, this controversy took a new turn with the revelation that *Scientific American*, America's leading science magazine, refused to hire a superbly qualified science writer because the writer disbelieved in Darwin's theory of evolution. Not that discrimination based on belief is anything new. But this time it has attracted national attention, and has greatly raised the stakes in the controversy--not only for the disputants, but for everyone.

Background

The *Scientific American* affair began in May 1988 when science writer Forrest Mims submitted a proposal to *Scientific American* to write the magazine's "Amateur Scientist" column. Mims, a respected science writer with 70 books and several hundred articles to his credit, had long dreamed of writing the "Amateur Scientist," and in late July that dream seemed to come true when the magazine's editor, Jonathan Piel, asked Mims if he would like to take over the column. Piel then invited Mims to come to New York to discuss the details.

It was in New York that things turned sour. According to Mims, Piel at first praised Mims' work and expressed considerable enthusiasm for the topics that Mims proposed to cover. But later on, as Mims was listing off the various periodicals in which he had published articles, he happened to mention that he had written for some Christian magazines. The editor stopped him, and asked him what he had written for the Christian magazines. He then asked Mims, "Do you accept Darwin's theory of evolution?" Mims responded that he did not. From then on, Mims says, Piel's attitude toward him changed dramatically.

Piel expressed great concern about Mims' beliefs, and told him that he would not be permitted to write anything for any publication that might embarrass *Scientific American*. To ensure this, all of Mims' outside writings would have to be reviewed prior to publication. Piel warned Mims that if an outside article was published without review, and caused subsequent embarrassment to *Scientific American*, Mims would face a pay cut or dismissal.

Inquiries about Mims' beliefs were not limited to the interview with Piel. In phone conversations that took place during August, September, and October, different editors from *Scientific American* asked him several such questions, including whether he was a fundamentalist, and whether he believed in the sanctity of life. The editors also told Mims that his religious beliefs were a major area of concern. It eventually became clear that Mims would not get the column.

Meanwhile, *Scientific American* on August 30 assigned Mims a trial column for \$2000. Mims submitted two articles on September 23, and another one later on. Piel's response to the three articles was very positive. In a phone conversation--which Mims taped, after determining it was legal to do so--Piel said "There's no question that on their own merits the columns are fabulous...they're great...What you've written is first rate...Give me three of them and I'll run them...I'll buy them from you."

During the call, however, Piel expressed concern about Mims' religious views being exploited by third parties, or linked with *Scientific American*, thereby embarrassing "the good name of this magazine." When Mims tried to reassure Piel that he would never use the column to promote his beliefs, Piel replied "I trust you. You're a man of honor and integrity...It's the public relations nightmare that's keeping me awake."

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On October 8, 1990, Jonathan Piel's public relations nightmare became horribly real when the *Houston Chronicle* broke Mims' story to the public. The reality, though, was much worse than Piel could have ever dreamt. After two weeks, the *Wall Street Journal* picked up the story, followed by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and countless other newspapers across the country. *Scientific American* was now fully in the public eye, caught in a most unflattering light.

Many of those interviewed for the newspaper articles issued ringing condemnations of the magazine's actions. Even worse, two former editors, who had been with *Scientific American* when Mims was turned down, admitted to reporters that Mims' beliefs were the reason he wasn't hired. Former managing editor, Armand Schwab Jr., said "*Scientific American* is a science magazine; it's largely written by scientists. We're completely dependent on the good will of working scientists for those articles, so there's a question of whether or not this could conceivably threaten the credibility of the magazine. You have to understand that creationism is sort of a shibboleth for scientists." Schwab added, "My own conclusion after some time was that the creationist beliefs did not militate against his doing a column for us. I just assumed Mims was smart enough that if he dealt with animals to not say 'all of whom were created and survived the flood,' etc."

Tim Appenzeller, former associate editor for the magazine and now senior editor for *The Sciences*, said to the *Houston Chronicle* "There was concern that *Scientific American* might be linked to a Flat Earther or something. There was no question in anyone's mind that he would have been a good columnist for the Amateur Scientist....I was one of several people on the staff who thought he should be taken on. Without a doubt, (Christianity) led to his not being offered the job of the Amateur Scientist column, and specifically it was creationism."

In the wake of these and other revelations, opinion has run hard against *Scientific American*. Editorialists, liberal and conservative alike, have lambasted the magazine for its treatment of Mims. The ACLU has offered Mims its help, and, in a letter to the president of *Scientific American*, characterized the actions of the magazine as belonging to another era, if not another century. In short, there has been a gathering consensus that the magazine has simply gone too far, and has done Mims a serious injustice.

A Chilling Effect

Despite the support Forrest Mims has received in the national media, Mims' story does not yet have a happy ending. For one thing, *Scientific American* has not recanted its actions, and this has raised concerns that the magazine's position will hinder the freedom of scientists to express their personal beliefs. Lamar Hankins, acting director of the Texas office of the ACLU, stated, "Every scientist who hears about this is going to wind up saying, 'Boy, I'd better not let anyone find out what I believe or I'll end up not getting published again.' It's certainly the type of thing that has a chilling effect."

Mims asserts that he has seen the chill begin to spread: "I'm hearing that in phone calls already, not only from scientists, but from newspapers and magazine writers, and from radio people. An unexpected aspect of the controversy is that many members of the media have expressed sympathy because they may someday be asked questions about their personal beliefs."

Thus, although *Scientific American* has indeed experienced a public relations nightmare, the long-term result of their action could harm not only creationism, but freedom of expression as a whole.

Die-Hards

Another disturbing development is the way in which some Darwinists have chosen to justify the magazine's actions, resorting to libelous *ad hominem*s and displaying distressing attitudes toward freedom of conscience. One of the more egregious examples of this occurred on October 31, when

Dr. Eugenie Scott, Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education, appeared with Forrest Mims on the CNN's *Crossfire*. During the broadcast, Dr. Scott made some astonishing comments.

Early in the broadcast, co-host Cal Thomas asked Eugenie Scott: "Dr. Scott in San Francisco, let me jump in here and ask you a question. There are an awful lot of Americans, not only religious Americans, who believe that you evolutionists are trying to censor and silence people who don't agree with you. Isn't the essence of scientific inquiry free and open access and debate?"

Eugenie Scott replied, "It is indeed, but I think what we have to look at is what are we--what are giving--what are we calling equally valid ideas? We're not dealing with political speech, we're not dealing with opinions on art. We're dealing with what science is..."

In essence, Dr. Scott seemed to be saying that freedom of conscience doesn't extend to science, because science deals in matters of truth--as opposed to matters of opinion. Such a viewpoint indicates a grave misunderstanding of both the nature of science and the meaning of freedom of conscience.

Dr. Scott's manner of contrasting science with "opinion" is strikingly similar to certain passages from the California Science Framework, a document on which her organization had substantial input. In that document, the authors asserted that science was distinct from other disciplines, like history, literary criticism, and philosophy, because science aims to be objective, testable, and consistent. This is a seriously misguided view, aptly called *scientism*. As philosopher of science Nicholas Rescher points out:

The theorist who maintains that science is the be-all and end- all--that what is not in science books is not worth knowing--is an ideologist with a peculiar and distorted doctrine of his own. For him, science is no longer a sector of the cognitive enterprise but an all-inclusive world-view. This is the doctrine not of *science* but of *scientism*.

To take this stance is not to celebrate science but to distort it....¹

Objectivity, testability, and consistency are the hallmark of *all* scholarly activity. They separate good scholarship from bad scholarship, not science from everything else. And it is troubling when an organization ostensibly dedicated to science education does not recognize this fact.

Even more troubling, however, is the apparent implication that First Amendment protections are somehow irrelevant to science, the idea being that free speech and freedom of conscience should apply to areas in which truth is relative--i.e. in matters of opinion. But freedom of conscience is not something meant to apply only (or even primarily) to matters of simple opinion. It was intended to protect people from the tyranny of "unassailable truths" imposed by those in power. After all, how many inquisitions, religious or secular, ever bothered with matters that the authorities deemed to be merely matters of opinion? What needed protecting was not "opinion," but "truth." By implying otherwise, Dr. Scott has identified herself and her organization with a viewpoint that should give everyone cause for great concern.

In addition to her disturbing remarks on science and freedom of speech, Dr. Scott also made a libelous attack on Forrest Mims. Her attack occurred during the latter part of the broadcast, in answer to another query by Cal Thomas:

¹ Rescher, N. (1984). *The Limits of Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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Thomas: Let's put the shoe on the other foot for the moment. Let's say that you were applying to a prestigious magazine or to a university for a research or teaching position and you were asked to put down your religious preference and let's say the head of the personnel department who was deciding on which person should be hired saw that you were of a religious faith or no religious faith that was different from his or her own and decided that you should not get that position because they were afraid that your religious faith or nonreligious faith might impact upon the university of magazine. Would you be upset? Would you be angry? Would you sue?

Dr. Scott: No, I'd have to talk to a lawyer about that, but I think the issue here has been unfortunately framed in terms of science versus religion and it's not that at all. It's really a matter of scientific competency. What you might consider is that evolution is not just that man descended from apes. Evolution is a theme. It's a grand unifying principle that runs across all scientific fields. Now, I'm not defending--

Thomas: But scientific--excuse me--

Scott: Let me finish. Let me finish.

Thomas: All right.

Scott: I am not an employee of *Scientific American*, so, you know, I am not defending them. They can defend themselves but what I would consider if I were in this--in their position is whether you would be--whether they would be limiting the scope of this column by hiring somebody who is so far out of the scientific mainstream. This man would not be able to write about a wide variety of scientific topics because of his views which are basically religious.

The point that Dr. Scott tried to make is one that has surfaced repeatedly in the creation/evolution debate: evolution is so integral to science and so well established that disbelievers cannot possibly be competent as scientists--or science writers.

This view, however, trades on equivocation and vagueness. As Dr. Scott uses the term, evolution is a "grand unifying principle that runs across all scientific fields." Or, as she stated earlier in the broadcast, "Evolution means that change has taken place in the history of the universe." But evolution in this vague sense is irrelevant to Mims' beliefs. What Mims had difficulty accepting was not the fact that change has taken place in the history of the universe. (How could *anyone* object to such a trivial statement?) His objection was to a theory of biological change that is much more controversial², and much less central to science--even biological science³--than Dr. Scott and others would have us believe.

² "Until only a few years ago, the 'synthetic' or 'neo-Darwinist' theory of evolution stood virtually unchallenged as the basis of our understanding of the organic world. There were, to be sure, a few who held out against the consensus, but they had very little influence on the majority of biologists. Almost all the research that was undertaken in evolution was designed to investigate the operation of natural selection, and was seen as confirming the theory.

"Today, however, the picture is entirely different. More and more workers are showing signs of dissatisfaction with the synthetic theory. Some are attacking its philosophical foundations, arguing that the reason that it has been so amply confirmed is simply that it is unfalsifiable: with a little ingenuity any observation can be made to appear consistent with it. Others have deliberately setting out to work in just those

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Dr. Scott's remarks, therefore, amount to little more than a libelous, and irrational, attack on Mims. Given Mims' credentials, and the fact that his competence was never an issue with the staff at *Scientific American*, Dr. Scott's remarks tell us more about herself than Forrest Mims and show just how far some people will go to protect a cherished "grand theme."

Dr. Scott's *ad hominem* is particularly unsettling in light of her conspicuous involvement in science education. Recent reform efforts in science education have strongly emphasized teaching science as a way of knowing, and have laid great stress on getting students to apply scientific skills and attitudes to everyday situations. By eschewing a scientific attitude in favor of an ill-founded *ad hominem* attack, Dr. Scott has become an unfortunate role-model and has perhaps even damaged the credibility of her organization as a promoter of scientific literacy.

Conclusion

Although the general support for Forrest Mims in the media is an encouraging sign, the actions of *Scientific American* and its supporters are still a source of genuine concern. In these actions one can see a troubling disregard for important principles and ideals. In this context, the following warning seems particularly appropriate:

Recent controversies over religion and public life have too often become a form of warfare in which individuals, motives, and reputations have been impugned. The intensity of the debate is commensurate with the importance of the issues debated, but to those engaged in this warfare we present two arguments for reappraisal and restraint.

The lesser argument is one of expediency and is based on the ironic fact that each side has become the best argument for the other. One side's excesses have become the other side's arguments; one side's extremists the other side's recruiters. The danger is that, as the ideological warfare becomes self-perpetuating, more

areas in which neo-Darwinism is least comfortable, like the problem of gaps in the fossil record or the mechanisms of non-Mendelian inheritance. Still others, notably some systematists, have decided to ignore the theory altogether, and to carry on their research without any *a priori* assumption about how evolution has occurred. Perhaps most significantly of all, there is now appearing a stream of articles and books defending the synthetic theory.

"It is not so long ago that hardly anyone thought this was necessary."

Ho, M.-W. & Saunders, P.T. (1984). Preface. *Beyond Neo-Darwinism*. (M.-W. Ho & P.T. Saunders eds.), p. ix.

³ "While evolution may well be the thread that ties all of biology together, concern about the fabric of the subject seems to have had little play in much of modern biology. There are professional biologists who would be indifferent to the title and substance of Theodosios Dobzhansky's 1973 essay "Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in Light of Evolution." Indeed, as I found the other day, when speaking with a bright, and not-that-young, molecular geneticist, there are biologists out there who have never heard of Professor Dobzhansky. One can be a successful practitioner of many areas of contemporary biology without considering how organisms, molecules or phenomena came to be or their descent relationships. A relative absence of interest in evolution prevails in a number of areas of biology, with high-tech molecular biology being the most prominent of them."

Levin, B.R. (1984). Science as a Way of Knowing--Molecular Evolution. *American Zoologist*, 24, pp. 451-464. (p. 451).

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serious issues and broader national interests will be forgotten and the bitterness deepened.

The more important argument is one of principle and is based on the fact that the several sides have pursued their objectives in ways which contradict their own best ideals. Too often, for example, religious believers have been uncharitable, liberals have been illiberal, conservatives have been insensitive to tradition, champions of tolerance have been intolerant, defenders of free speech have been censorious, and citizens of a republic based on democratic accommodation have succumbed to a habit of relentless confrontation.⁴

Whatever we debate, then, let us do so as vigorously as the issues demand. But let us never sacrifice those things that are truly important.

⁴ From *The Williamsburg Charter*, presented to the nation on June 25, 1988, the 200th anniversary of Virginia's call for the Bill of Rights.