



comment

debating creationism

Just before Christmas I went to a show that was the atheist's dream at that time of year – *Nine Lessons and Carols for Godless People*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, atheist Richard Dawkins topped the bill with readings from three of his books. Considering the publicity atheist views of the relationship between science and religion have been given lately, it came as little surprise to see Professor Dawkins flanked by an assemblage of 'celebrities': Ricky Gervais, Jarvis Cocker, Mark Thomas, Robin Ince and Ben Goldacre to name a few. To see so many well-known performers together at Christmas to talk (and laugh) about the shortcomings of Creationist ideas would have been astonishing a few years ago. Now, Creationism, Intelligent Design and the so-called science versus religion debate have become topics of conversation over a quiet drink in the pub, no longer reserved for academics and theologians.

It is important to understand the distinction between religion and Creationism. In *God, the Big Bang and Bunsen Burning Issues*, The Reverend Dr John Polkinghorne, KBE said: *'If we think Genesis 1 and 2 is a divinely dictated scientific textbook that God wrote to save us the trouble of having to do science, then we're making a big mistake. These chapters are theological writings.'*

This argument is supported by a great many Christians, some of whom are leading scientists. Although Creationists are Christians, not all

Christians are Creationists by default; in fact, like John Polkinghorne, most do not believe the Bible to be a literal account of what happened at the dawn of time and space. Some people believe that the Creation took place over millions of years and that the days described in Genesis represented ages. But the vocal minority, the Special Creationists, believe this view amounts to evolution. They are calling for 'equal' time in science class, with half given to their very specific brand of Creationism and the rest apportioned between everybody else.

Why should this matter to microbiology? Creationism draws on microbiology to support its beliefs, namely that the origin of life on Earth is so unlikely that it probably didn't happen without a guiding hand. Considering the stack of evidence in support of various scientific theories explaining the appearance of life, microbiologists are in a good position to contest the Creation, on these grounds at least.

So should we give equal time to Creationism? I don't think so, at least not in science lessons. I think religion and science go hand in hand; the disciplines we now recognize as science would not have come about without the input and support of religion. But this does not mean that one can be applied to explain the other – just as science cannot explain God, religion cannot be applied to science.

I happen to accept empirical science and evolution as true, but that's not to say that we must all make a choice –

Charles Darwin came up with the theory of evolution. Yet in 2009, the year we celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth, creationism is a topic of great public interest. **Lucy Goodchild** discusses the relevance of the science versus religion debate to microbiologists.

indeed, many scientists are devoted Christians who say science and religion are perfectly complementary. However, they are not the same.

Whatever we think of Creationism and its more recent manifestation, Intelligent Design, they exist and are here to stay. Silencing Creationists will not solve the issue – and will not do the next generation of leading microbiologists any good at all. I think it is our obligation to encourage debate, if nothing else to produce well-rounded, informed microbiologists who can discuss meaningfully issues such as these.

Empirical evidence for early events in the history of the Universe, for the age of the Earth and for the origin of life on our planet is comparatively overwhelming. Instead of muffling opposing views, we should be banging the science drum. As empiricists, we take for granted the theory of evolution and often fail to recognize that its intricacies may not be understood fully by most people.

2009, the year of Charles Darwin's 200th birthday and the 150th anniversary of *On the Origin of Species* should give us the perfect opportunity to highlight this magnificent explanation for the variety of life on Earth.

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Please note that views expressed in Comment do not necessarily reflect official policy of the SGM Council.

▲ Adam and Eve, and DNA as the 'Tree of Knowledge'. Jean-François Podevin / Science Photo Library