When Cosmologies Collide

Judith Shulevitz

New York Times Book Review; Jan 22, 2006; Research Library
pg. 10

ESSAY | Judith Shulevitz

If Darwinism is such a powerful explanation, why won’t creationism go away?
Perhaps some of the fault lies with evolutionists themselves.

I n the merely controversial part of his decision last month banning “intelligent design” from biology classes in Dover, Pa., Judge John E. Jones III ruled that intelligent design, a theory that attributes the complexity of life to supernatural causes, amounts to religion, not science. In the part that really drove some of the theory’s supporters crazy, he pronounced it “utterly false” to think that evolution is incompatible with faith in God. An editorialist on the Web site of the Discovery Institute, a research group that promotes intelligent design, declared: "the judge had no business trying to tell him what to believe. "This is like a judge assuring us that it is ‘utterly false’ that Judaism is inconsistent with eating pork," he wrote.

The judge was echoing a position taken by scientific expert witnesses, who had testified that science is a method, not a creed—a way of finding things out about the natural world, not a refutation of anything beyond that world. On the enduring mysteries of divinity and transcendence, science remains officially agnostic. But people rarely hear to official doctrine. That science and religion belong to separate realms (they’re “non-overlapping magisteria,” as Stephen Jay Gould grandly put it) is a good line to stick to if you’re going to argue that the creationists play unfair, but it’s wishful to think that scientists always live by it. Perhaps it’s unreasonable to expect that they would. Given what it takes to train for a career in science, you have to ask why a person would persist if naturalism didn’t strike him as the best way of explaining the world. It’s no accident that you find a far greater proportion of nonbelievers among American scientists—upward of 80 percent—than among Americans in general. Those who deny that they discount nonmaterialist accounts of reality may have conducted a cold-eyed scrutiny of their own assumptions, but it’s equally possible that they haven’t. “Scientists sometimes deceive themselves into thinking that philosophical ideas are only, at best, decorative or para-scientific,” the philosopher Daniel Dennett has written. “But there is no such thing as science; there is only science whose philosophical baggage is taken on board without examination.”

Could something as trivial as scientists’ lack of self-awareness help explain why, nearly 150 years after Darwin, creationism in its various forms has become the most popular critique of scientific thought? As scientists tend to respond to the attack on evolution. Rather than trying to understand creationism as a culturally meaningful phenomenon, say, a peculiarly American objection to the way elites talk about evolution—they generally approach it as a set of ludicrous claims easily dismantled by established scientific theory.

Eugenie C. Scott’s EVOLUTION VS. CREATIONISM: (University of California, $19.95) represents this strategy at its best, and least inflammatory. Scott, a physical anthropologist, runs the National Center for Science Education, which defends the teaching of evolution in high schools. (She advised the parents fighting the Dover school board.) Scott could be said to be the one really doing God’s work as she patiently rebuts people who make most other scientists spit gaskets like short-circuiting robots. Her book is both a straightforward history of the debate and an anthology of essays written by partisans on each side. Its main virtue is to explain the scientific method, which many invoke but (few de-scribe vividly) to turn about the facts of the astronomical, chemical, geological, and biological bases of evolutionary theory in unusually plain English.

Anyone who wants to defend evolution at his next church picnic should arm himself with this book. What’s Flood’s geology? It’s the creationist thesis that a vast canopied of hot vapor once surrounded the earth, cooled down in the time of Noah, and turned into a flood; an atmospheric scientist explains why that’s impossible. Why don’t evolutionary biologists worry about the Cambrian Explosion, when invertebrates showed up on earth as it out of nowhere? Because paleontologists don’t need to see a fossil of every species that ever existed to infer the links between species, for one thing. But our fellow scientists through the legal history of American creationism—the court rulings that forced anti-evolutionists to adapt to their increasingly secular world by adopting scientific jargon.

In treating science as no more than what scientists say it is, however, Scott does not help us grasp why creationism has continued to thrive. For that you’d need THE EVOLUTION-CREATION STRUGGLE (Harvard University, $26.95), by the philosopher of science Michael Ruse. Ruse is “an ardent Darwinian” who has testified against the inclusion of creationism in public school science curriculums. Nonetheless, he says, “we can be curious about how we use the word ‘evolution,’ because it actually conveys two meanings, the science of evolution and something else it calls ‘evolutionism.’ Evolutionism is the part of evolutionary thought that reaches beyond testable science. Evolutionism addresses questions of origins, the meaning of life, and the nature of the cosmos. In other words, it does all the work of a religion, but from a secular perspective. What gets billed as a war between hard science and religious theo-
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Ruse takes readers through three milieus of evolutionism and proto-evolutionism, starting with the Old Testament, which introduced the idea of historical change—and the world where time had been changeless. He passes through Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and the Reformation before stopping for a long visit with Charles Darwin. Darwin’s genius is so obvious, Ruse says, his greatest expedition, until he discovered natural selection, the continu-

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John T. Scopes in 1925, the year of his trial for teaching evolution in Dayton, Tenn. Above, a book sale in Dayton during the trial.

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The Conformist

A law professor draws on his life to challenge society's invidious peer pressure.

COVERING
The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights.
By Kenji Yoshino.

By ANN ALTHOUSE

“D

ON’T think so hard,” Kenji Yoshino’s mother once told him in Japanese. “Life is not that simple.” But Yoshino has spent his life thinking very hard, as if the problems of sexual orientation and racial identity that have troubled him so much really were amenable to simple solutions. He seems to be the first to grasp the scholarly attention. But “Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights” is, in large part, a personal story.

Yoshino was born with a light touch, beginning with his struggles to understand himself through poetry. He remembers his best teacher at Harvard, a “whippet-thin charmer” who described with “waist-length auburn hair and eyebrows sharp as circus performers,” who called him “Radiating Navette.” At a time when he is spending his Saturday night in his “cement-block dorm room . . . agonizing not over women, or men, but line breaks,” she pushes him with questions like “have you entered the realm of the erotic yet?” Later, as a brooding Rhodes Scholar, given to long soaks in the bathtub, he visits the Moonlight World display at the London Zoo and identifies with a loris lurking in the darkness.

He chooses law school as the way out of this malaise. Having come out as gay, he feels too vulnerable as a poet and imagines that law will protect him. At Yale Law School, he seeks out the courses on sexual orientation and becomes so inspired that he sleeps with his arm around the casebook. Nevertheless, when he returns to Yale as a professor and deputy dean, he still feels the need to play down his homosexuality in order to ensure that fellow faculty members do not associate him with the “gay examples” when teaching constitutional law. He attends law school functions without bringing the man he is dating. And he takes it to heart when a colleague remarks that he should be a “homosexual professional” and not a “professional homosexual.”

Despite coming out to his friends, his parents and his colleagues, Yoshino still feels affected by the pressure to act as though being gay does not have much effect on his life. That is, he is required to “cover.” The term covering comes from Erving Goffman’s “Stigma.” Goffman distinguished covering from passing: rather than trying to render a characteristic invisible, a person might manage or mute it. Franklin D. Roosevelt was Goffman’s example: everyone knew he needed a wheelchair, but he would still have himself seated behind a table before a meeting.

Yoshino covers in the many ways he has felt called upon to cover his gay identity. He gets the message that he ought to modify his physical appearance, to steer away from gay culture and to minimize his relationships and his activism. His mother accepts that he’s gay but wonders why he needs to be such a jandaitu — a Joan of Arc.

Though sexual orientation provides Yoshino with his primary example of the difficulties of covering, he also writes perceptively about his racial identity. He is the son of people who adopted a strategy of assimilation, both in Japan and in the United States. They deftly switch personalities, taking on the behavioral component of Japanese identity: “I . . . funked Japanese race.”

Beyond his own life experiences, Yoshino recounts stories from legal cases, taking special note of those instances where members of protected groups lose in court when they decline to meet a standard of appearance or sameness that they could comply with — like the black woman who was fired by American Airlines for wearing her hair in cornrows. He also tells of a case in which a man found himself fired by a company that had asked for a “neutral” hairstyle.

If this is an “assault on our civil rights,” as the subtitle has it, we might expect to hear how the courts can save us, but readers who get their hopes up will be disappointed, even as readers (like me) who dread an overambitious litigation agenda are disarmed. To his credit, Yoshino recognizes that the problems he has described extend into the realm of personal relationships and, more important, the individual’s own inhibitions. What could the legal solution to covering be? The fact is, his mother was right: life is not that simple.

Yoshino is bold enough not to engage in the covering demands made of the law professor. Though he speaks vaguely of shifting the legal discourse from equality to liberty, he holds out little hope for new remedies. Lawsuits result when people “have no better way of talking to each other.” The real work of civil rights takes place outside of the law, he tells us, in individual conversations about the reasons for demanding assimilation to some imagined standard of behavior, and the burdens felt by those who are asked to cover their authentic selves.

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