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# White-Coated Scientists versus Black-Robed Preachers

The deadline was looming for the “Green Streak,” the afternoon edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, and the frenzied atmosphere in the newsroom was carbonated with activity. Teletypes clattered behind Plexiglas partitions. Copy boys darted from desk to desk. Reporters hunched over their typewriters in intense concentration. Editors barked into telephones. On the wall, a huge clock counted down the minutes.

A copy boy hustled into the cavernous room and tossed three copies of the *Chicago Daily News*, hot off the presses, onto the middle of the city desk. Assistant city editors lunged at them and hungrily scanned the front page to see if the competition had beaten them on anything. One of them let out a grunt. In one motion, he ripped out an article and then pivoted, waving it in the face of a reporter who had made the mistake of hovering too closely.

“Recover this!” he demanded. Without looking at it, the reporter grabbed the scrap and headed for his desk to quickly make some phone calls so he could produce a similar story.

Reporters at City Hall, the Criminal Courts Building, the State of Illinois Building, and Police Headquarters were phoning assistant city editors to “dope” their stories. Once the reporters had provided a quick capsule of the situation, the assistants would cover their phone with a hand and ask their boss, the city editor, for a decision on how the article should be handled.

“The cops were chasing a car and it hit a bus,” one of them called over to the city editor. “Five injured, none seriously.”

“School bus?”

“City bus.”

The city editor frowned. “Gimme a four-head,” came the order—code for a three-paragraph story.

“Four head,” the assistant repeated into the phone. He pushed a button to connect the reporter to a rewrite man, who would take down details on a typewriter and then craft the item in a matter of minutes.

The year was 1974. I was a rookie, just three months out of the University of Missouri’s school of journalism. I had worked on smaller newspapers since I was fourteen, but this was the big leagues. I was already addicted to the adrenaline.

On that particular day, though, I felt more like a spectator than a participant. I strolled over to the city desk and unceremoniously dropped my story into the “in” basket. It was a meager offering—a one-paragraph “brief” about two pipe bombs exploding in the south suburbs. The item was destined for section three, page ten, in a journalistic trash heap called “metropolitan briefs.” However, my fortunes were about to change.

Standing outside his glass-walled office, the assistant managing editor caught my attention. “C’mere,” he called.

I walked over. “What’s up?”

“Look at this,” he said as he handed me a piece of wire copy. He didn’t wait for me to read it before he started filling me in.

“Crazy stuff in West Virginia,” he said. “People getting shot at, schools getting bombed—all because some hillbillies are mad about the textbooks being used in the schools.”

“You’re kidding,” I said. “Good story.”

My eyes scanned the brief Associated Press report. I quickly noticed that pastors were denouncing textbooks as being “anti-God” and that rallies were being held in churches. My stereotypes clicked in.

“Christians, huh?” I said. “So much for loving their neighbors. And not being judgmental.”

He motioned for me to follow him over to a safe along the wall. He twirled the dial and opened it, reaching in to grab two packets of twenty-dollar bills.

“Get out to West Virginia and check it out,” he said as he handed

me the six hundred dollars of expense money. “Give me a story for the bulldog.” He was referring to the first edition of next Sunday’s paper. That didn’t give me much time. It was already noon on Monday.

I started to walk away, but the editor grabbed my arm. “Look—be careful,” he said.

I was oblivious. “What do you mean?”

He gestured toward the AP story I was clutching. “These hillbillies hate reporters,” he said. “They’ve already beaten up two of them. Things are volatile. Be smart.”

I couldn’t tell if the emotional surge I felt was fear or exhilaration. In the end, it didn’t really matter. I knew I had to do whatever it would take to get the story. But the irony wasn’t lost on me: these people were followers of the guy who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” and yet I was being warned to keep on guard to avoid getting roughed up.

“*Christians . . .*,” I muttered under my breath. Hadn’t they heard, as one skeptic famously put it, that modern science had already dissolved Christianity in a vat of nitric acid?<sup>1</sup>

## Is Darwin Responsible?

From the gleaming office buildings in downtown Charleston to the dreary backwood hamlets in surrounding Kanawha County, the situation was tense when I arrived the next day and began poking around for a story. Many parents were keeping their kids out of school; coal miners had walked off the job in wildcat strikes, threatening to cripple the local economy; empty school buses were being shot at; firebombs had been lobbed at some vacant classrooms; picketers were marching with signs saying, “Even Hillbillies Have Constitutional Rights.” Violence had left two people seriously injured. Intimidation and threats were rampant.

The wire services could handle the day-to-day breaking developments in the crisis; I planned to write an overview article that explained the dynamics of the controversy. Working from my hotel room, I called for appointments with key figures in the conflict and then drove in my rental car from homes to restaurants to schools to offices in order to interview them. I quickly found that just mentioning the word “textbook” to anybody in these parts would instantly release a flood of

vehement opinion as thick as the lush trees that carpet the Appalachian hillsides.

“The books bought for our school children would teach them to lose their love of God, to honor draft dodgers and revolutionaries, and to lose their respect for their parents,” insisted the intense, dark-haired wife of a Baptist minister as I interviewed her on the front porch of her house. As a recently elected school board member, she was leading the charge against the textbooks.

A community activist was just as opinionated in the other direction. “For the first time,” she told me, “these textbooks reflect real Americanism, and I think it’s exciting. Americanism, to me, is listening to all kinds of voices, not just white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.”

The school superintendent, who had resigned at the height of the controversy, only shook his head in disdain when I asked him what he thought. “People around here are going flaky,” he sighed. “Both poles are wrong.”

Meanwhile, ninety-six thousand copies of three hundred different textbooks had been temporarily removed from classrooms and stored in cardboard cartons at a warehouse west of Charleston. They included Scott Foresman Co.’s *Galaxy* series; McDougal, Littel Co.’s *Man* series; Allyn & Bacon Inc.’s *Breakthrough* series; and such classics as *The Lord of the Flies*, *Of Human Bondage*, *Moby Dick*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Animal Farm*, and Plato’s *Republic*.

What were people so angry about? Many said they were outraged at the “situational ethics” propounded in some of the books. One textbook included the story of a child cheating a merchant out of a penny. Students were asked, “Most people think that cheating is wrong. Do you think there is ever a time when it might be right? Tell when it is. Tell why you think it is right.” Parents seized on this as undermining the Christian values they were attempting to inculcate into their children.

“We’re trying to get our kids to do the right thing,” the parent of an elementary student told me in obvious frustration. “Then these books come along and say that sometimes the wrong thing is the right thing. We just don’t believe in that! The Ten Commandments are the Ten Commandments.”

But there was also an undercurrent of something else: an inchoate

fear of the future, of change, of new ideas, of cultural transformation. I could sense a simmering frustration in people over how modernity was eroding the foundation of their faith. “Many of the protesters,” wrote the *Charleston Gazette*, “are demonstrating against a changing world.”

This underlying concern was crystallized for me in a conversation with a local businessman over hamburgers at a Charleston diner. When I asked him why he was so enraged over the textbooks, he reached into his pocket and took out a newspaper clipping about the textbook imbroglio.

“Listen to what *Dynamics of Language* tells our kids,” he said as he quoted an excerpt from the textbook: “Read the theory of divine origin and the story of the Tower of Babel as told in Genesis. Be prepared to explain one or more ways these stories could be interpreted.”

He tossed the well-worn clipping on the table in disgust. “The *theory* of divine origin!” he declared. “The Word of God is *not* a theory. Take God out of creation and what’s left? Evolution? Scientists want to teach our kids that divine origin is just a theory that stupid people believe but that evolution is a scientific fact. Well, it’s not. And that’s at the bottom of this.”

I cocked my head. “Are you saying Charles Darwin is responsible for all of this?”

“Let me put it this way,” he said. “If Darwin’s right, we’re just sophisticated monkeys. The Bible is wrong. There is no God. And without God, there’s no right or wrong. We can just make up our morals as we go. The basis for all we believe is destroyed. And that’s why this country is headed to hell in a handbasket. Is Darwin responsible? I’ll say this: people have to choose between science and faith, between evolution and the Bible, between the Ten Commandments and make-’em-up-as-you-go ethics. We’ve made our choice—and we’re not budging.”

He took a swig of beer. “Have you seen the teacher’s manual?” he asked. I shook my head. “It says students should compare the Bible story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den to that myth about a lion. You know which one I’m talking about?”

“Androcles and the Lion?” I asked, referring to the Aesop fable about an escaped slave who removed a thorn from the paw of a lion he encountered in the woods. Later, the recaptured slave was to be eaten by

a lion for the entertainment of the crowd at the Roman Coliseum, but it turned out to be the same lion he had befriended. Instead of eating him, the lion gently licked his hand, which impressed the emperor so much that the slave was set free.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” the businessman said as he wagged a french fry at me. “What does it tell our kids when they’re supposed to compare that to the Bible? That the Bible is just a bunch of fairy tales? That it’s all a myth? That you can interpret the Bible any way you darn well please, even if it rips the guts out of what it really says? We’ve got to put our foot down. I’m not going to let a bunch of eggheads destroy the faith of my children.”

I felt like I was finally getting down to the root of the controversy. I scribbled down his words as well as I could. Part of me, though, wanted to debate him.

Didn’t he know that evolution *is* a proven fact? Didn’t he realize that in an age of science and technology that it’s simply irrational to believe the ancient myths about God creating the world and shaping human beings in his own image? Did he really want his children clinging desperately to religious pap that is so clearly disproved by modern cosmology, astronomy, zoology, comparative anatomy, geology, paleontology, biology, genetics, and anthropology?

I was tempted to say, “Hey, what *is* the difference between Daniel in the Lion’s Den and Androcles and the Lion? They’re *both* fairy tales!” But I wasn’t there to get into an argument. I was there to report the story—and what a bizarre story it was!

In the last part of the twentieth century, in an era when we had split the atom and put people on the moon and found fossils that prove evolution beyond all doubt, a bunch of religious zealots were tying a county into knots because they couldn’t let go of religious folklore. It simply defied all reason.

I thought for a moment. “One more question,” I said. “Do you ever have any doubts?”

He waved his hand as if to draw my attention to the universe. “Look at the world,” he said. “God’s fingerprints are all over it. I’m absolutely sure of that. How else do you explain nature and human beings? And

God has told us how to live. If we ignore him — well, then the whole world's in for a whole lot of trouble.”

I reached for the check. “Thanks for your opinions,” I told him.

## Standing Trial in West Virginia

All of this was good stuff for my story, but I needed more. The leaders I had interviewed had all denounced the violence as being the unfortunate actions of a few hotheads. But to tell the whole story, I needed to see the underbelly of the controversy. I wanted to tap into the rage of those who chose violence over debate. My opportunity quickly came.

A rally, I heard, was being planned for Friday night over in the isolated, heavily wooded community of Campbell's Creek. Angry parents were expected to gather and vote on whether to continue to keep their kids out of school. Tempers were at a boiling point, and the word was that reporters were not welcome. It seemed that folks were incensed over the way some big newspapers had caricatured them as know-nothing hillbillies, so this was intended to be a private gathering of the faithful, where they could freely speak their minds.

This was my chance. I decided to infiltrate the rally to get an unvarnished look at what was really going on. At the time, it seemed like a good idea.

I rendezvoused with Charlie, a top-notch photojournalist dispatched by the *Tribune* to capture the textbook war on film. We decided that we would sneak into the rural school where hundreds of agitated protesters were expected to pack the bleachers. I'd scribble my notes surreptitiously; Charlie would see whether he could snap a few discreet photos. We figured if we could just blend into the crowd, we'd get away with it.

We figured wrong.

Our shiny new rental car stood in sharp contrast with the dusty pick-up trucks and well-used cars that were hastily left at all angles on the gravel parking lot. We tried to be as inconspicuous as possible as we walked nonchalantly beside the stragglers who were streaming toward the gymnasium. Charlie kept his Nikons hidden beneath his waist-length denim jacket, but there was no way he could conceal his long black hair.

At first, I thought we'd gotten away with it. We flowed with the crowd through a side door of the gym. Inside, the noise was deafening. Two large bleachers were packed with animated and agitated people who all seemed to be talking at once. Someone was setting up a small speaker on the floor of the gym. Charlie and I were milling around with people who were standing by the door, unable to find a seat. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to us.

A beefy man in a white short-sleeve shirt and dark, narrow tie took the handheld microphone and blew into it to see if it was working. "Let me have your attention," he shouted over the din. "Let's get started."

People began to settle down. But as they did, I got the uncomfortable feeling that a lot of eyes were starting to bore in on us. "Wait a minute," the guy at the microphone said. "We've got some intruders here!" With that, he turned and glared at Charlie and me. People around us pivoted to confront the two of us. The room fell silent.

"C'mon out here!" the man demanded, gesturing for both of us to come onto the gym floor. "Who are you? You're not welcome here!"

With that, the crowd erupted into catcalls and jeers. Unsure what to do, Charlie and I stepped hesitantly toward the man with the microphone. It seemed like all of the anger in the room was suddenly focused on the two of us.

My first thought was that I didn't like becoming part of the story. My second thought was that this mob was going to throw us out of the place—and we were going to get roughed up along the way. My third thought was that nothing in journalism school had prepared me for this.

"What should we do with these two boys?" the man asked, baiting the crowd. Now the folks were really riled! I felt like I was being put on trial. When I used to hear the phrase *my knees were shaking*, I thought it was just a figure of speech. But my knees *were* shaking!

"Let's get rid of them!" he declared.

The door was blocked. There was nowhere to run. But just as some men were surging forward to grab us, a part-time truck driver, part-time preacher stepped up and wrested away the microphone. He raised his hand to stop them.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "Just a minute! Settle down!" Obviously,

he was someone the crowd respected. The noise subsided. “Now listen to me,” he continued. “I’ve seen this reporter around town the last few days, interviewing both sides of this thing. I think he wants to tell the story like it is. I think he wants to be fair. I say we give him a chance. I say we let him stay!”

The crowd was uncertain. There was some grumbling. The preacher turned toward me. “You’re gonna be fair, aren’t you?” he asked.

I nodded as reassuringly as I could.

The preacher turned to the crowd. “How else are we going to get our story out?” he asked. “Let’s welcome these fellas and trust they’re gonna do the right thing!”

That seemed to convince them. The mood quickly shifted. In fact, some people started applauding. Instead of throwing us out, someone ushered us to seats in the front row of the bleachers. Charlie took out his cameras and began snapping pictures. I took out my notebook and pen.

### “We’ll Win — One Way or the Other”

The preacher took control of the meeting. He turned to the crowd and held aloft a book titled *Facts about VD*. “This is gonna turn your stomachs, but this is the kind of book your children are reading!” he shouted in his Mayberry accent.

There were gasps. “Get those books out of the schools!” someone shouted. “Get ’em out!” several others echoed as if they were saying “amen” at a revival meeting.

The preacher began to pace back and forth, perspiration rings expanding on his white shirt, as he waved the book. “Y’all have got to force yourselves to look at these books so you can really understand what the issue is all about!” he declared. “Your children may be reading these books. This is not the way to teach our kids about sex—divorced from morality, divorced from God. And that’s why we’ve got to continue keeping our kids out of school for another week to boycott these filthy, un-American, anti-religious books.”

That catapulted the crowd into a clapping frenzy. Money poured into the Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets being passed around for donations to fight the battle.

The rally continued in that vein for another half an hour or so. At one point, the preacher's words were reminiscent of the businessman's comments earlier in the week. "We're not evolved from slime," he declared defiantly. "We're created in the image of God Almighty. And he's given us the best textbook in the world to tell us how to live!" The folks roared their approval.

"The only victory we'll accept is a total victory," he declared. "We'll win—one way or the other."

When he raised the issue of whether the school boycott should be continued through the coming week, the resounding response was yes. The goal of the rally accomplished, he issued a quick "God bless y'all," and the meeting was over.

Now I had all the color I needed for my story. I hustled back to my hotel and banged out a piece for Sunday's paper, which appeared on the front page under the headline, "Textbook Battle Rages in Bible Belt County." I followed that with an in-depth article that also ran on the front page the next day.<sup>2</sup>

Settling back into my seat as I flew back to Chicago, I reflected on the experience and concluded that I had fulfilled my promise to the preacher: I had been fair to both sides. My articles were balanced and responsible. But, frankly, it had been difficult.

Inside that gymnasium Friday night, I felt like I had stared unadorned Christianity in the face—and saw it for the dinosaur it was. Why couldn't these people get their heads out of the sand and admit the obvious: science had put their God out of a job! White-coated scientists of the modern world had trumped the black-robed priests of medieval times. Darwin's theory of evolution—no, the absolute *fact* of evolution—meant that there is no universal morality decreed by a deity, only culturally conditioned values that vary from place to place and situation to situation.

I knew intuitively what prominent evolutionary biologist and historian William Provine of Cornell University would spell out explicitly in a debate years later. If Darwinism is true, he said, then there are five inescapable conclusions:

there's no evidence for God

there's no life after death

there's no absolute foundation for right and wrong  
there's no ultimate meaning for life  
people don't really have free will<sup>3</sup>

To me, the controversy in West Virginia was a symbolic last gasp of an archaic belief system hurtling toward oblivion. As more and more young people are taught the ironclad evidence for evolution, as they understand the impossibility of miracles, as they see how science is on the path to ultimately explaining everything in the universe, then belief in an invisible God, in angels and demons, in a long-ago rabbi who walked on water and multiplied fish and bread and returned from the dead, will fade into a fringe superstition confined only to dreary backwoods hamlets like Campbell's Creek, West Virginia.

As far as I was concerned, that day couldn't come soon enough.

# The Images of Evolution

*The problem is to get [people] to reject irrational and supernatural explanations of the world, the demons that exist only in their imaginations, and to accept a social and intellectual apparatus, Science, as the only begetter of truth.*

Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin<sup>1</sup>

*Science . . . has become identified with a philosophy known as materialism or scientific naturalism. This philosophy insists that nature is all there is, or at least the only thing about which we can have any knowledge. It follows that nature had to do its own creating, and that the means of creation must not have included any role for God.*

Evolution critic Phillip E. Johnson<sup>2</sup>

Rewind history to 1966. The big hit on the radio was Paul McCartney crooning “Michelle.” On a television show called *I Spy*, Bill Cosby was becoming the first African-American to share the lead in a dramatic series. Bread was nineteen cents a loaf; a new Ford Fairlane cost \$1,600.

As a fourteen-year-old freshman at Prospect High School in north-west suburban Chicago, I was sitting in a third-floor science classroom overlooking the asphalt parking lot, second row from the window, third seat from the front, when I first heard the liberating information that propelled me toward a life of atheism.

I already liked this introductory biology class. It fit well with my logical way of looking at the world, an approach that was already tugging me toward the evidence-oriented fields of journalism and law. I

was incurably curious, always after answers, constantly trying to figure out how things worked.

As a youngster, my parents once gave me an electric train for Christmas. A short time later my dad discovered me in the garage, repeatedly hurling the locomotive against the concrete floor in a futile attempt to crack it open. I didn't understand why he was so upset. All I was doing, I meekly explained, was trying to figure out what made it work.

That's why I liked science. Here the teacher actually encouraged me to cut open a frog to find out how it functioned. Science gave me an excuse to ask all the "why" questions that plagued me, to try genetic experiments by breeding fruit flies, and to peer inside plants to learn about how they reproduced. To me, science represented the empirical, the trustworthy, the hard facts, the experimentally proven. I tended to dismiss everything else as being mere opinion, conjecture, superstition—and mindless faith.

I would have resonated with what philosopher J. P. Moreland wrote years later, when he said that for many people the term *scientific* meant something was "good, rational, and modern," whereas something not scientific was old-fashioned and not worth the belief of thinking people.<sup>3</sup>

My trust in science had been shaped by growing up in post-Sputnik America, where science and technology had been exalted as holding the keys to the survival of our country. The Eisenhower administration had exhorted young people to pursue careers in science so America could catch up with—and surpass—our enemy, the Soviets, who had stunned the world in 1957 by launching the world's first artificial satellite into an elliptical orbit around Earth.

Later, as our nation began unraveling in the 1960s, when social conventions were being turned upside down, when relativism and situational ethics were starting to create a quicksand of morality, when one tradition after another was being upended, I saw science as remaining steady—a foundation, an anchor, always rock-solid in its methodology while at the same time constantly moving forward in a reflection of the American can-do spirit.

Put a man on the moon? Nobody doubted we would do it. New

technology, from transistors to Teflon, kept making life in America better and better. Could a cure for cancer be far off?

It was no accident that my admiration for scientific thinking was developing at the same time that my confidence in God was waning. In Sunday school and confirmation classes during my junior high school years, my “why” questions weren’t always welcomed. While many of the other students seemed to automatically accept the truth of the Bible, I needed reasons for trusting it. But more often than not, my quest for answers was rebuffed. Instead, I was required to read, memorize, and regurgitate Bible verses and the writings of Martin Luther and other seemingly irrelevant theologians from the distant past.

Who cared what these long-dead zealots believed? I had no use for the “soft” issues of faith and spirituality; rather, I was gravitating toward the “hard” facts of science. As Eugenie Scott of the National Center for Science Education observed, “You can’t put an omnipotent deity in a test tube.”<sup>4</sup> If there wasn’t any scientific or rational evidence for believing in such an entity, then I wasn’t interested.

That’s when, on that pivotal day in biology class in 1966, I began to learn about scientific discoveries that, to borrow the words of British zoologist Richard Dawkins, “made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.”<sup>5</sup>

## The Images of Evolution

I tend to be a visual thinker. Images stick in my mind for long periods of time. When I think back to those days as a high school student, what I learned in the classroom and through my eager consumption of outside books can be summed up in a series of pictures.

### IMAGE #1: The Tubes, Flasks, and Electrodes of the Stanley Miller Experiment

This was the most powerful picture of all—the laboratory apparatus that Stanley Miller, then a graduate student at the University of Chicago, used in 1953 to artificially produce the building blocks of life. By reproducing the atmosphere of the primitive earth and then shoot-

ing electric sparks through it to simulate lightning, Miller managed to produce a red goo containing amino acids.

The moment I first learned of Miller's success, my mind flashed to the logical implication: if the origin of life can be explained solely through natural processes, then God was out of a job! After all, there was no need for a deity if living organisms could emerge by themselves out of the primordial soup and then develop naturally over the eons into more and more complex creatures—a scenario that was illustrated by the next image of evolution.

### IMAGE #2: Darwin's "Tree of Life"

The first time I read Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, I was struck that there was only one illustration: a sketch in which he depicted the development of life as a tree, starting with an ancient ancestor at the bottom and then blossoming upward into limbs, branches, and twigs as life evolved with increasing diversity and complexity.

As a recent textbook explained, Darwinism teaches that all life forms are "related through descent from some unknown prototype that lived in the remote past."<sup>6</sup>

It seemed obvious to me that there's such a phenomenon as micro-evolution, or variation within different kinds of animals. I could see this illustrated in my own neighborhood, where we had dozens of different varieties of dogs. But I was captivated by the more ambitious claim of macroevolution—that natural selection acting on random variation can explain how primitive cells morphed over long periods of time into every species of creatures, including human beings. In other words, fish were transformed into amphibians, amphibians into reptiles, and reptiles into birds and mammals, with humans having the same ancestor as apes.

So while Miller seemed to establish that life could have arisen spontaneously in the chemical oceans of long-ago Earth, Darwin's theory accounted for how so many millions of species of organisms could slowly and gradually develop over huge expanses of time. Then came further confirmation of our common ancestry, illustrated by the next image.

### IMAGE #3: Ernst Haeckel's Drawings of Embryos

German biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose sketches of embryos could be found in virtually every evolution book I studied, provided even more evidence for all of life having the same ancient progenitor. By juxtaposing drawings of an embryonic fish, salamander, tortoise, chick, hog, calf, rabbit, and human, Haeckel graphically established that they all appeared strikingly similar in their earliest stages of development. It was only later that they became distinctly different.

As my eyes scanned the top row of Haeckel's drawings, representing the early stage of embryonic development, I was stunned by how these vertebrates—which would eventually grow to become so radically different from each other—were virtually indistinguishable.

Who could tell them apart? The human embryo could just as easily have been any one of the others. Obviously, Darwin was right when he said “we ought to frankly admit” universal common ancestry. And certainly the inexorable progression toward ever-increasing complexity could be seen in the next image.

### IMAGE #4: The Missing Link

The fossil is so astounding that one paleontologist called it “a holy relic of the past that has become a powerful symbol of the evolutionary process itself.”<sup>7</sup> It's the most famous fossil in the world: the *archaeopteryx*, or “ancient wing,” a creature dating back 150 million years. With the wings, feathers, and wishbone of a bird, but with a lizard-like tail and claws on its wings, it was hailed as the missing link between reptiles and modern birds.

One look at a picture of that fossil chased away any misgivings about whether the fossil record supported Darwin's theory. Here was a half-bird, half-reptile—I needed to look no further to believe that paleontology backed up Darwin. Indeed, the *archaeopteryx*, having been discovered in Germany immediately after *The Origin of Species* was published, “helped enormously to establish the credibility of Darwinism and to discredit skeptics,” Johnson said.<sup>8</sup>

These images were just the beginning of my education in evolution. By the time I had completed my study of the topic, I was thoroughly

convinced that Darwin had explained away any need for God. And that's a phenomenon I have seen over and over again.

I've lost count of the number of spiritual skeptics who have told me that their seeds of doubt were planted in high school or college when they studied Darwinism. When I read in 2002 about an Eagle Scout being booted from his troop for refusing to pledge reverence to God, I wasn't surprised to find out he "has been an atheist since studying evolution in the ninth grade."<sup>9</sup>

As Oxford evolutionist Dawkins said: "The more you understand the significance of evolution, the more you are pushed away from an agnostic position and towards atheism."<sup>10</sup>

## Darwin versus God

Not everyone, however, believes that Darwinian evolutionary theory and God are incompatible. There are some scientists and theologians who see no conflict between believing in the doctrines of Darwin and the doctrines of Christianity.

Nobel-winning biologist Christian de Duve insisted there's "no sense in which atheism is enforced or established by science,"<sup>11</sup> while biology professor Kenneth R. Miller of Brown University declared that evolution "is not anti-God."<sup>12</sup> Philosopher Michael Ruse, himself an ardent naturalist, answered the question, "Can a Darwinian be a Christian?" by declaring, "Absolutely!" In his view, "No sound argument has been mounted showing that Darwinism implies atheism."<sup>13</sup>

Biologist Jean Pond, who formerly taught at Whitworth College, proudly describes herself as "a scientist, an evolutionist, a great admirer of Charles Darwin, and a Christian."<sup>14</sup> She elaborated by saying: "Believing that evolution occurred—that humans and all other living things are related as part of creation's giant family tree, that it is possible that the first cell arose by the natural processes of chemical evolution—neither requires nor even promotes an atheistic worldview."<sup>15</sup>

Personally, however, I couldn't understand how the Darwinism I was taught left any meaningful role for God. I was told that the evolutionary process was by definition *undirected*—and to me, that automatically

ruled out a supernatural deity who was pulling the strings behind the scene.

One recent textbook was very clear about this: “By coupling undirected, purposeless variation to the blind, uncaring process of natural selection, Darwin made theological or spiritual explanations of life processes superfluous.”<sup>16</sup> Other textbooks affirm that evolution is “random and undirected” and “without either plan or purpose” and that “Darwin gave biology a sound scientific basis by attributing the diversity of life to natural causes rather than supernatural creation.”<sup>17</sup>

If this is how scientists define Darwinism, then it seemed to me that God has been given his walking papers. To try to somehow salvage an obscure role for him appears pointless, which Cornell’s William Provine readily concedes: “A widespread theological view now exists saying that God started off the world, props it up and works through laws of nature, very subtly, so subtly that its action is undetectable,” he said. “But that kind of God is effectively no different to my mind than atheism.”<sup>18</sup>

Certainly Christians would say that God is not a hidden and uninvolved deity who thoroughly conceals his activity, but rather that he has intervened in the world so much that the Bible says his qualities “have been clearly seen . . . from what has been made.”<sup>19</sup> Cambridge-educated philosopher of science Stephen C. Meyer, director of the Center for Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute in Seattle, put it this way:

Many evolutionary biologists admit that science cannot categorically exclude the possibility that some kind of deity still might exist. Nor can they deny the possibility of a divine designer who so masks his creative activity in apparently natural processes as to escape scientific detection. Yet for most scientific materialists such an undetectable entity hardly seems worthy of consideration.<sup>20</sup>

Even so, Meyer stressed that “contemporary Darwinism does not envision a God-guided process of evolutionary change.”<sup>21</sup> He cites a famous observation by the late evolutionary biologist George Gaylord Simpson that Darwinism teaches “man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind.”<sup>22</sup> The ramifications are unmistakable, according to Meyer: “To say that God guides an inher-

ently unguided natural process, or that God designed a natural mechanism as a substitute for his design, is clearly contradictory.”<sup>23</sup>

Nancy Pearcey, who has written extensively on science and faith, insists that “you can have God *or* natural selection, but not both.”<sup>24</sup> She pointed out that Darwin himself recognized that the presence of an omnipotent deity would actually undermine his theory. “If we admit God into the process, Darwin argued, then God would ensure that only ‘the right variations occurred . . . and natural selection would be superfluous.’”<sup>25</sup>

Law professor Phillip Johnson, author of the breakthrough critique of evolution *Darwin On Trial*, agrees that “the whole point of Darwinism is to show that there is no need for a supernatural creator, because nature can do the creating by itself.”<sup>26</sup>

In fact, many of the evolutionists who have felt the sting of Johnson’s criticism nevertheless find themselves in agreement with him on this particular matter. For example, evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr emphasized that “the real core of Darwinism” is natural selection, which “permits the explanation of adaption . . . by natural means, instead of by divine intervention.”<sup>27</sup>

Another leading evolutionist, Francisco Ayala, who was ordained a Dominican priest prior to his science career and yet refused in a recent interview to confirm whether he still believes in God,<sup>28</sup> said Darwin’s “greatest accomplishment” was to show that “living beings can be explained as the result of a natural process, natural selection, without any need to resort to a Creator or other external agent.”<sup>29</sup>

When an attorney asked the outspoken Provine whether there is “an intellectually honest Christian evolutionist position . . . or do we simply have to check our brains at the church house door,” Provine’s answer was straightforward: “You indeed have to check your brains.”<sup>30</sup> Apparently to him, the term “Christian evolutionist” is oxymoronic.

Pulitzer Prize-winning sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson was adamant on this issue. “If humankind evolved by Darwinian natural selection,” he said, “genetic chance and environmental necessity, *not God*, made the species.”<sup>31</sup> No ambiguity there.

Characteristically, *Time* magazine summed up the matter succinctly:

“Charles Darwin didn’t want to murder God, as he once put it. But he did.”<sup>32</sup>

## Darwin’s Universal Acid

I wasn’t aware of these kinds of observations when I was a student. I just knew intuitively that the theories of Darwin gave me an intellectual basis to reject the mythology of Christianity that my parents had tried to foist on me through my younger years.

At one point, I remember reading the *World Book Encyclopedia* that my parents had given me as a birthday present to answer the “why” questions with which I was always tormenting them. Reading selectively from the entry on evolution served to reinforce my sense that Christianity and Darwinism are incompatible.

“In the Bible, God is held to be the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Ultimate End of all things,” the encyclopedia said. “Many Christians believe that it is impossible to reconcile this conviction with the idea that evolutionary development has been brought about by natural forces present in organic life.”<sup>33</sup>

Everything fell into place for me. My assessment was that you didn’t need a Creator if life can emerge unassisted from the primordial slime of the primitive earth, and you don’t need God to create human beings in his image if we are merely the product of the impersonal forces of natural selection. In short, you don’t need the Bible if you’ve got *The Origin of Species*.

I was experiencing on a personal level what philosopher Daniel Dennett has observed: Darwinism is a “universal acid” that “eats through just about every traditional concept and leaves in its wake a revolutionized worldview.”<sup>34</sup>

My worldview was being revolutionized, all right, yet in my youthful optimism I wasn’t ready to examine some of the disheartening implications of my new philosophy. I conveniently ignored the grim picture painted by British atheist Bertrand Russell, who wrote about how science had presented us with a world that was “purposeless” and “void of meaning.”<sup>35</sup> He said:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction . . . that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than facing this “unyielding despair” that's implicit in a world without God, I reveled in my newly achieved freedom from God's moral strictures. For me, living without God meant living one hundred percent for myself. Freed from someday being held accountable for my actions, I felt unleashed to pursue personal happiness and pleasure at all costs.

The sexual revolution of the '60s and '70s was starting to dawn, and I was liberated to indulge as much as I wanted, without having to look over my shoulder at God's disapproving gaze. As a journalist, I was unshackled to compete without always having to abide by those pesky rules of ethics and morality. I would let nothing, and certainly nobody, stand between me and my ambitions.

Who cared if scientific materialism taught that there is nothing other than matter and therefore no person could possibly survive the grave? I was too young to trifle with the implications of that; instead, I pursued the kind of immortality I could attain by leaving my mark as a successful journalist, whose investigations and articles would spur new legislation and social reform. As for the finality of death—well, I had plenty of time to ponder that later. There was too much living to do in the meantime.

So the seeds of my atheism were sown as a youngster when religious authorities seemed unwilling or unable to help me get answers to my questions about God. My disbelief flowered after discovering

that Darwinism displaces the need for a deity. And my atheism came to full bloom when I studied Jesus in college and was told that no science-minded person could possibly believe what the New Testament says about him.

According to members of the left-wing Jesus Seminar, the same impulse that had given rise to experimental science, “which sought to put all knowledge to the test of close and repeated observation,” also prompted their efforts to finally distinguish “the factual from the fictional” in Jesus’ life. They concluded that in “this scientific age,” modern thinkers can no longer believe that Jesus did or said much of what the Bible claims. As they put it:

The Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo’s telescope. The old deities and demons were swept from the skies by that remarkable glass. Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo have dismantled the mythological abodes of the gods and Satan, and bequeathed us secular heavens.<sup>37</sup>

By the time I was halfway through college, my atheistic attitudes were so entrenched that I was becoming more and more impatient toward people of mindless faith, like those protesters I would later encounter in West Virginia. I couldn’t fathom their stubborn reluctance to subject their outmoded beliefs to that “universal acid” of modern scientific thought.

I felt smugly arrogant toward them. Let them remain slaves to their wishful thinking about a heavenly home and to the straightjacket morality of their imaginary God. As for me, I would dispassionately follow the conclusions of the scientists and historians whose logical and consistent research has reduced the world to material processes only.

## The Investigation Begins

If I had stopped asking questions, that’s where I would have remained. But with my background in journalism and law, the demanding of answers was woven into my nature. So five years after my adventure in

West Virginia, when my wife Leslie announced that she had decided to become a follower of Jesus, it was understandable that the first words I uttered would be in the form of an inquiry.

It wasn't asked politely. Instead, it was spewed in a venomous and accusatory tone: "*What has gotten into you?*" I simply couldn't comprehend how such a rational person could buy into an irrational religious concoction of wishful thinking, make-believe, mythology, and legend.

In the ensuing months, however, as Leslie's character began to change, as her values underwent a transformation, as she became a more loving and caring and authentic person, I began asking the same question, only this time in a softer and more sincere tone of genuine wonderment: "*What has gotten into you?*" Something—or, as she would claim, Someone—was undeniably changing her for the better.

Clearly, I needed to investigate what was going on. And so I began asking more questions—a lot of them—about faith, God, and the Bible. I was determined to go wherever the answers would take me—even though, frankly, I wasn't quite prepared back then for where I would ultimately end up.

This multifaceted spiritual investigation lasted nearly two years. In my previous book, *The Case for Christ*, which retraced and expanded upon this journey, I discussed the answers I received from thirteen leading experts about the historical evidence for Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>38</sup> In my subsequent book, *The Case for Faith*, I pursued answers to the "Big Eight" questions about Christianity—the kind of issues that began troubling me even as a youngster but that nobody had been willing to answer.<sup>39</sup>

In those earlier books, however, I barely touched upon another important dimension to my investigation. Because science had played such an instrumental role in propelling me toward atheism, I also devoted a lot of time to posing questions about what the latest research says about God. With an open mind, I began asking:

- Are science and faith doomed to always be at war? Was I right to think that a science-minded individual must necessarily eschew religious beliefs? Or is there a fundamentally different way to view the relationship between the spiritual and the scientific?

- Does the latest scientific evidence tend to point toward or away from the existence of God?
- Are those images of evolution that spurred me to atheism still valid in light of the most recent discoveries in science?

When I first began exploring these issues in the early 1980s, I found that there was a sufficient amount of evidence to guide me to a confident conclusion. Much has changed since then, however. Science is always pressing relentlessly forward, and a lot more data and many more discoveries have been poured into the reservoir of scientific knowledge during the past twenty years.

All of which has prompted me to ask a new question: does this deeper and richer pool of contemporary scientific research contradict or affirm the conclusions I reached so many years ago? Put another way, in which direction—toward Darwin or God—is the current arrow of science now pointing?

“Science,” said two-time Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling, “is the search for the truth.”<sup>40</sup> And that’s what I decided to embark upon—a new journey of discovery that would both broaden and update the original investigation I conducted into science more than two decades ago.

My approach would be to cross-examine authorities in various scientific disciplines about the most current findings in their fields. In selecting these experts, I sought doctorate-level professors who have unquestioned expertise, are able to communicate in accessible language, and who refuse to limit themselves only to the politically correct world of naturalism or materialism. After all, it wouldn’t make sense to rule out any hypothesis at the outset. I wanted the freedom to pursue *all* possibilities.

I would stand in the shoes of the skeptic, reading all sides of each topic and posing the toughest objections that have been raised. More importantly, I would ask the experts the kind of questions that personally plagued me when I was an atheist. In fact, perhaps these are the very same issues that have proven to be sticking points in your own spiritual journey. Maybe you too have wondered whether belief in a supernatural God is consistent with what science has uncovered about the natural world.

If so, I hope you'll join me in my investigation. Strip away your preconceptions as much as possible and keep an open mind as you eavesdrop on my conversations with these fascinating scientists and science-trained philosophers. At the end you can decide for yourself whether their answers and explanations stand up to scrutiny.

Let me caution you, though, that getting beyond our prejudices can be difficult. At least, it was for me. I once had a lot of motivation to stay on the atheistic path. I didn't want there to be a God who would hold me responsible for my immoral lifestyle. As the legal-affairs editor at the most powerful newspaper in the Midwest, I was used to pushing people around, not humbly submitting myself to some invisible spiritual authority.

I was trained not only to ask questions, however, but to go wherever the answers would take me. And I trust you have the same attitude. I hope you'll be willing to challenge what you may have been taught in a classroom some time back—information that might have been eclipsed by more recent discoveries.

Scientists themselves will tell you that this is entirely appropriate. "All scientific knowledge," said no less an authority than the National Academy of Sciences, "is, in principle, subject to change as new evidence becomes available."<sup>41</sup>

What does this new evidence show? Be prepared to be amazed—*even dazzled*—by the startling new narrative that science has been busy writing over the past few decades.

"The Old Story of Science is scientific materialism," wrote theoretical physicist George Stanciu and science philosopher Robert Augros. "It holds that only matter exists and that all things are explicable in terms of matter alone."<sup>42</sup> But, they said, in recent years "science has undergone a series of dramatic revolutions" that have "transformed the modern conception of man and his place in the world."<sup>43</sup>

This astounding "New Story of Science"—with its surprising plot twists and intriguing characters—unfolds in the coming pages, starting with an interview that rewrites the books that first led me into atheism.