Managing the Conflict Between Evolution & Religion

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The creation versus evolution conflict smolders on. Courts and curriculum committees have closed the issue repeatedly at national, state and community levels, but the embers still glow. Occasionally, the controversy re-erupts into full flame. Parents band together and file suit against their school board claiming that the teaching of evolution undermines their children’s worldview. State legislatures argue laws designed to de-emphasize the role of evolution in the curriculum. University scientists gather to champion the need for an uncompromised approach to the teaching of evolution in secondary schools. Often, though, the controversy remains just on the brink of flare-up, a tension that biology teachers feel more than any other players in the conflict.

Biology teachers face the demanding challenge of crafting a learning environment that mediates colliding agendas. They want students to deepen their understanding of biological evolution in order to become scientifically literate citizens. At the same time, they also want to support, rather than undermine, the values of students, parents and communities whose worldviews can oppose the teaching of evolution. On a private, and often unspoken level, many biology teachers themselves must face their own unresolved conflicts between biological evolution and their personal worldviews. Teachers from various religious and philosophical backgrounds face conflicts between their beliefs and biological evolution that range from simply thought-provoking to deeply disturbing. Is it possible for teachers to actually resolve these conflicting ideas?

Strategies & Assumptions

To answer this question, we talked with conservative Christians who were science teachers, future science teachers, science teacher educators and scientists. Our goal was to determine how they managed conflict between their religious beliefs and their beliefs about biological evolution. We chose this group of people because they were deeply devoted to science, yet they were also deeply committed to their religious beliefs. Those two passions often created conflict, and at times the conflict raged.

We interviewed a total of 17 people who had identified themselves as orthodox or fundamentalist Christians and who had demonstrated, by virtue of their current occupation, a strong interest in science and science teaching. The sample was not selected systematically to be representative of any particular population, but we consciously strove for diversity in terms of age, gender and professional status in the academic world. Our participants included two university professors of science, a professor and two graduate students in science education, four high school biology teachers, and eight prospective middle- or secondary-level science teachers (undergraduate or nontraditional graduate students in science education). They included 11 females and six males. All were white, and all but one were natives of the southeastern United States.

Informal, exploratory conversations were held with four of the participants (three undergraduate students and one graduate student), and subsequent data were collected through minimally structured interviews with 15 of the 17 participants. Interviews were conducted in a naturalistic, emergent style without a formal protocol, although a consistent effort was made to elicit responses addressing three broad questions:

1. What do you believe about evolution, or the history of the Earth and of life?
2. How are your beliefs about evolution related to your religious beliefs?
3. Given your career interest in science, do you feel a conflict between your professional and personal beliefs and values, and, if so, how do you resolve that conflict?

The teachers’ descriptions of their beliefs make up the data for our research, a research style often called qualitative research. We reviewed the transcripts of each of the interviews for initial themes in the participants’ comments. We used these themes to guide repeated analysis of each interview transcript for