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BioScience

Organisms from Molecules to the Environment

American Institute of Biological Sciences

Evolution's Next Move

If a candidate for administrator of NASA disavowed the heliocentric theory of the solar system, the outcry would dispatch his or her bid to oblivion. Yet when three Republican candidates running for president of the United States indicated their disbelief in the theory of evolution during a televised forum in California, their bids for the nation's top office suffered no evident damage. The campaigns of Sam Brownback, Mike Huckabee, and Tom Tancredo may even have benefited, as the *Washington Post* wryly observed, given evolution's unpopularity.

Antievolutionism has a long history in the land of the free. Some of the aspiring candidates in California may have lied, but whether lies or ignorance explain the spectacle, sober reflection is in order. Trofim Lysenko's politically popular but delusional theories of genetics set back Soviet agriculture for decades. A US president who publicly rejected evolution could, in selecting the heads of the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Agriculture, and other arms of the executive, exert political pressures on biology that would make recent well-publicized instances look timid. The Enlightenment might not be the done deal everyone thought.

Opinion surveys suggest that US popular antipathy to evolution (anomalous among developed nations) arises from the false notion that Darwin's theory is tantamount to rejecting morality. To the contrary, evolution is entirely friendly to ethical values, including respect for property and sexual morality. Science's account of how we got here provides reasons to believe that ethics are essential to normal human relationships. It seems many people are uncomfortable with Darwin because they are unaware of that. For some of them, it may be easier to embrace religious ethics than to reconcile their convictions with science, since their picture of natural selection may be a mere cartoon.

Belief in evolution is impossible for anyone who takes the Bible or the Koran literally. But millions of people hew to more nuanced—or simply inconsistent—religious beliefs that nonetheless provide rewarding feelings, whatever the mechanisms. Many of them are willing to help science if they don't feel their moral intuitions threatened.

Evolution's image problem in the United States is dire. Biologists would do well to make alliances where they can, reaching out to religious moderates. We will boost our chances by remembering the comfort that religion provides for many, and explaining how evolution's account of human origins can provide comfort of its own. Year of Science 2009 (*www.yearofscience2009.org*) might be one place to start. Religious moderates can help to make science comprehensible to the citizenry (including politicians), and may well join nonreligious scientists in showing Brownback, Huckabee, and Tancredo to the door.

TIMOTHY M. BEARDSLEY
Editor in Chief

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