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## Review: Species of Origins

—Reports of the National Center for Science Education—

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**Reviewer:** George E Webb, Tennessee Tech University  
*This version might differ slightly from the print publication.*

—Work under Review—

**Title:** *Species of Origins: America's Search for a Creation Story*  
**Author(s):** Karl W Giberson and Donald A Yerxa  
Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2002. 277 pages.  
[Purchase this book online](#)

The continuing controversy over the teaching of evolution in the public schools has undergone various transformations during the last century. From the post-World War I campaign of William Jennings Bryan through the creation science movement of Henry Morris to the "intelligent design" efforts associated with Phillip E Johnson, opposition to the inclusion of evolutionary concepts in the science curriculum has remained a constant in recent American history. Emphasizing the constancy of anti-evolution sentiment, however, can lead to the conclusion that a monolithic movement seeks to remove Darwin from the public schools. A closer analysis reveals a far more complex situation.

The authors of *Species of Origins* (one a physicist, the other a historian) provide an overview of the various ideas behind the evolution/creation debate in the United States in an effort to clarify our understanding of this long-standing controversy. Following an introduction in which they stress their goal of a fair and balanced treatment of the various creation explanations (thus, *species of origins*), they provide a brief overview of the evolutionary explanation accepted by the scientific community. Specialists in the various disciplines they survey will, to be sure, blanch at the authors' discussions of such complex topics as the physics associated with the immediate aftermath of the Big Bang and the origin of life on earth, but the non-specialist will at least be exposed to important concepts. The authors end this chapter by emphasizing that despite the widespread acceptance of the evolutionary account by scientists, opinion polls consistently indicate that the public largely rejects this explanation.

Once the dichotomy between the scientific and public perspectives on origins is identified, they take the logical next step and rigorously analyze the different explanations offered by opponents to evolution. In an extensive and well-informed discussion of the creation science movement of Henry Morris and his colleagues, they emphasize that this version of anti-evolution sentiment must be examined within the scientific, religious, and social contexts of the movement. The literalistic reading of the Bible and the deeply-held concern about the decay of traditional morality are as

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important to the creation science perspective as is its focus on a 6-day creation and a global flood. The authors provide a carefully crafted discussion of all 3 contexts and are especially effective in describing the scientific arguments used by these creationists.

The authors make clear, however, that religious aspects dominate creation science. The importance of religion to creation scientists is in stark contrast to the situation among natural scientists, at least among those most active in the popularization of the evolutionary world view. In an intriguing chapter, the authors discuss the work of several popularizers, including Richard Dawkins, Steven Weinberg, Stephen Jay Gould, and others. Although they emphasize that a wide range of attitudes toward the science/religion clash exists among such popularizers, the authors conclude that traditional religion has no role to play in the popularizers' perspectives. The overt atheism of Dawkins is countered by the sense of loss Weinberg expresses over the lack of purpose in modern views of the universe, but persons of faith often find no significant difference between the two views. Gould's suggestion that science and religion work best when each restricts its focus to its own separate sphere works no better. The scientific sphere is concerned with facts, in his view, while the religious sphere is concerned with ethics and morality. To suggest that religion has nothing to do with "truth" is hardly a concept likely to attract support from the religious community.

Is there a middle path? The authors devote the remainder of their book to an examination of possible alternate explanations that would maintain both scientific and religious integrity. Such concepts as the gap and day/age models of creationism (rejected by Morris and his followers), as well as various versions of theistic evolution, are all described in sufficient detail to show the reader how complex the middle way might be. In the same category is the most recent of anti-evolution efforts, the "intelligent design" movement. The authors devote the last two chapters to this concept and its reception, providing a sound overview of the ideas involved in this latest challenge to Darwin.

The great strength of this book rests in the authors' decision to take the continuing evolution/creation debate seriously. They thus accept that any study of this topic must take the various components of the debate seriously, as well. Readers who want a balanced account of the various modes of anti-evolution sentiment of the past half century will find in *Species of Origins* a valuable introduction to an intriguing cultural phenomenon.

But is it possible that the authors have taken these anti-evolution views *too* seriously?

In their introduction, the authors acknowledge that they have accepted the postmodern view of the supposed clash between science and religion and have embraced the "methodological agnosticism" (p 10) of historian Ronald L. Numbers in an effort to provide a more accurate view of the debate. Such earlier concepts as a "warfare" between science and religion have largely been abandoned by historians of science, who now stress that the relation between the two throughout history has been much more complex than the earlier metaphors implied. Thus, creating a dichotomy between the "progressive" world of science and the "reactionary" world of religion is both inaccurate and counterproductive. Far better, the authors emphasize, to treat the creationists with the same intellectual respect as the scientists.

This is an admirable goal, to be sure, but it guides the authors into the postmodern muddle of the "science studies" perspective, in which the concept of an accurate portrayal of nature is an illusion. Consider the subtitle of this volume: *"America's Search for a Creation Story [emphasis added]"*. The chapter in which they summarize the modern scientific explanation of origins carries the title, *"The Modern Creation Story [emphasis added]"*. The authors emphasize frequently the need for a creation "story" for all cultures, ancient and modern, and stress that the current debate shows that such a need continues in the early 21st century.

Thus, American society seeks a "story" that will satisfy a deeply rooted cultural need.

The difficulty, of course, comes when there are two competing stories, one of which is largely based on a religious world view and the other largely based on a naturalistic world view. To determine which is "right", one needs to be able to evaluate the evidence presented in support. Is such evaluation taking place in contemporary America? If so, the question posed early in the authors' discussion takes on added significance: Why is it that most Americans reject the scientific explanation of origins?

The answer is embedded in the postmodern perspective the authors embrace. It is another example of the contemporary rejection of expertise that has increasingly guided discourse and decision-making over the last few decades. If we are dealing with different "stories", then does that not suggest that all "stories" are more-or-less acceptable? Or do we appeal to an "authority" who might have special expertise? This latter solution seems to be absent from non-evolutionary explanations of origins. Phillip E Johnson, the acknowledged founder of the "intelligent design" movement, plays a major role in the authors' discussion of contemporary anti-evolution sentiment. His credentials for offering a challenge to evolutionary explanations include his status as "a brilliant Berkeley law professor" (p 198), his academic position as "a recognized authority in criminal law and a tenured professor at Boalt Hall, the prestigious law school of the University of California at Berkeley" (p 200), and his ability to read popularizations of evolutionary theory "carefully through the eyes of a lawyer" (p 200). The publication data of most of the authors' cited references concerning anti-evolutionary ideas include the names of very few major publishers; most of these works have been published by religious publishing houses or in journals outside the academic mainstream. In short, those who seem to be the leading figures in the anti-evolution campaign (whether in creation science or "intelligent design") rarely have the background one would expect from individuals who are challenging one of the best established scientific concepts of the contemporary world.

Despite the authors' careful and balanced discussion of the various modes of thought concerning creation, in the final analysis their "story" suffers from a willingness to accept that scientists have no privileged position in crafting explanations of the natural world. A lawyer and a biologist are on equal footing when they attempt to offer explanations of the origin and development of life on earth. Surely, such a perspective carries the concept of "fairness" well beyond its proper role.

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