

USA: What's The Matter With Creationism?

Tuesday 9 October 2012, by [POLLITT Katha](#) (Date first published: July 2012).

Do you know what the worst thing about the recent Gallup poll on evolution is? It isn't that 46 percent of respondents are creationists ("God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last ten thousand years or so"). Or that 32 percent believe in "theistic evolution" ("Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process"). Or that only 15 percent said humans evolved and "God had no part in this process." It isn't even that the percentage of Americans with creationist views has barely budged since 1982, when it was 44 percent, with a small rise in the no-God vote (up from 9 percent) coming at the expense of the divine-help position (down from 38 percent). Or that 58 percent of Republicans are creationists, although that does explain a lot.

It's that the proportion of college graduates who are creationists is exactly the same as for the general public. That's right: 46 percent of Americans with sixteen long years of education under their belt believe the story of Adam and Eve is literally true. Even 25 percent of Americans with graduate degrees believe dinosaurs and humans romped together before Noah's flood. Needless to say, this remarkable demonstration of educational failure attracts little attention from those who call for improving our schools.

My brilliant husband, a sociologist and political theorist, refuses to get upset about the poll. It's quite annoying, actually. He thinks questions like these primarily elicit affirmations of identity, not literal convictions; declaring your belief in creationism is another way of saying you're a good Christian. That does rather beg the question of what a good Christian is, and why so many think it means refusing to use the brains God gave you. And yes, as you may have suspected, according to the Pew Research Center, evangelicals are far more likely than those of other faiths to hold creationist views; just 24 percent of them believe in evolution. Mormons come in even lower, at 22 percent, although official church doctrine has no problem with evolution.

Why does it matter that almost half the country rejects the overwhelming evidence of evolution, with or without the hand of God? After all, Americans are famously ignorant of many things—like where Iran is or when World War II took place—and we are still here. One reason is that rejecting evolution expresses more than an inability to think critically; it relies on a fundamentally paranoid worldview. Think what the world would have to be like for evolution to be false. Almost every scientist on earth would have to be engaged in a fraud so complex and extensive it involved every field from archaeology, paleontology, geology and genetics to biology, chemistry and physics. And yet this massive concatenation of lies and delusion is so full of obvious holes that a pastor with a Bible-college degree or a homeschooling parent with no degree at all can see right through it. A flute discovered in southern Germany is 43,000 years old? Not bloody likely. It's probably some old bone left over from an ancient barbecue. To celebrate its fifth anniversary, the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, has installed a holographic exhibit of Lucy, the famous proto-human fossil, showing how she was really just a few-thousand-year-old ape after all.

Patricia Princehouse, director of the evolutionary biology program at Case Western Reserve University, laughed when I suggested to her that the Gallup survey shows that education doesn't work. "There isn't much evolution education in the schools," she told me. "Most have no more than a lesson or two, and it isn't presented as connected with the rest of biology." In fact, students may not

even get that much exposure. Nationally, Princehouse said, at least 13 percent of biology teachers teach “young earth” creationism (not just humans but the earth itself is only 10,000 years old or thereabouts), despite laws forbidding it, and some 60 percent teach a watered-down version of evolution. They have to get along with their neighbors, after all. In Tennessee, home of the Scopes trial, a new law actually makes teaching creationism legal. “No one takes them to court,” Princehouse told me, “because creationism is so popular. Those who object are isolated and afraid of reprisals.” People tend to forget that Clarence Darrow lost the Scopes trial; until the Supreme Court ruled otherwise in 1968, it was illegal to teach evolution in public schools in about half a dozen states.

Kenneth Miller, a biology professor at Brown University and practicing Catholic who is a leading voice against creationism, agrees with Princehouse. “Science education has been remarkably ineffective,” he told me. “Those of us in the scientific community who are religious have a tremendous amount of work to do in the faith community.” Why bother? “There’s a potential for great harm when nearly half the population rejects the central organizing principle of the biological sciences. It’s useful for us as a species to understand that we are a recent appearance on this planet and that 99.9 percent of all species that have ever existed have gone extinct.” Evangelical parents may care less that their children learn science than that they avoid going to hell, but Miller points out that many of the major challenges facing the nation—and the world—are scientific in nature: climate change and energy policy, for instance. “To have a near majority essentially rejecting the scientific method is very troubling,” he says. And to have solidly grounded science waved away as political and theological propaganda could not come at a worse time. “Sea-level rise” is a “left-wing term,” said Virginia state legislator Chris Stolle, a Republican, successfully urging its replacement in a state-commissioned study by the expression “recurrent flooding.”

The group Answers in Genesis, which runs the Creation Museum, has plans to build a full-size replica of Noah’s Ark as part of its Ark Encounter theme park. If that “recurrent flooding” really gets going, you may wish you’d booked a cabin.

Katha Pollitt

P.S.

* Source: The Nation, July 2-9, 2012.