

Is Creationism Religion?

Worldview, the Definition of Religion, and the Asymmetry of the Public Square

Jerry Bergman Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The recurring charge that creationism is “religion” while evolution is “science” assumes that the definition of religion itself can cleanly separate the two. This paper argues that assumption fails on its own terms. Drawing on admissions from within the evolutionary establishment, including the philosopher of biology Michael Ruse, biologist and first Director General of UNESCO Julian Huxley, the moral philosopher Mary Midgley, the geneticist Richard Lewontin, and the sociobiologist E. O. Wilson, it shows that leading evolutionists have themselves described evolution as functioning as a secular religion, a myth, or an a priori metaphysical commitment. It then situates that concession against the legal record, in which the United States Supreme Court has recognized Secular Humanism among non-theistic religions (*Torcaso v. Watkins*, 1961) yet has struck down every attempt to teach the theistic account of origins in public science classrooms while protecting the naturalistic account (Epperson, 1968; McLean, 1982; Edwards, 1987; Kitzmiller, 2005). The result is an asymmetry: one worldview is mandated and the other is prohibited. Following the ornithologist and evolutionist turned creationist Douglas Dewar, the paper concludes that what is presented to the public as settled science actually carries the freight of what Dewar called the Transformist Illusion. A closing section anticipates the strongest objections to this thesis and answers them.

Keywords: worldview; definition of religion; Secular Humanism; naturalism; philosophy of biology; Establishment Clause; origins education; Transformist Illusion.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Defining Religion

Any argument over whether creationism is “religion” must begin where the disagreement actually lives, in the definition of religion. This is not a rhetorical dodge. It is the first substantive question, and, as Michael Ruse has observed, it is the material of the opening lecture in any introductory course on the philosophy of religion. Religion is not like a right angle, which a geometric figure either has or does not have. It calls instead for what philosophers term a polythetic definition: no single feature is necessary, but the presence of several is sufficient. Belief in God is important, yet Buddhists and certain Unitarians manage without it. A priesthood is important, yet the Quakers do without one. Once we grant that religion is defined by a cluster of family resemblances rather than by one decisive trait, the tidy border between “religion” and “science” becomes far harder to police than the public rhetoric supposes.

The central concern of religion, on this understanding, is worldview: an integrated account of where humans came from, why we exist, and what happens when we die. Two such accounts compete for that ground. The first, which enjoys the endorsement and protection of the modern secular state, answers that we arose by mutation filtered through natural selection, that we exist **to** survive and reproduce and that at death the body returns to dust and existence ends. The second, which the state largely excludes from its classrooms, answers that we were created by a higher power, that we exist to serve God, to love our neighbor, and to raise a family, and that death opens onto the renewed creation described in Scripture. Each account speaks to human origins, purpose, and destiny. Each is, in the polythetic sense, a worldview with religious weight.

The claim advanced here is not that evolutionary biology is false because it functions religiously, nor that its technical results collapse into theology. The claim is narrower and, for that reason, harder to answer, namely that the naturalistic account of origins has become the cornerstone of an established secular worldview, that the leading advocates of evolution have said as much in print, and that public policy has consequently entrenched one worldview into society while forbidding its rival. If that is so, then the familiar labeling, science on one side and religion on the other, describes a political settlement rather than a philosophical fact.

2. Two Rival Worldviews

The secular worldview has, over the past century, gained the ascendancy and become in practice the established faith of the state. That worldview is not merely a biological model of descent with modification. It is part of Secular Humanism, of which evolution is the cornerstone. It operates as an underlying belief system that shapes how people think, argue, and live. Most academic disciplines, as they are now practiced, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, and even law, are built on evolutionary and naturalistic assumptions about human nature and human origins. This is the “naturalistic” worldview, which holds that the whole of reality can be explained by natural law, time, chance, mutation, and natural selection. Against it stands the “theistic” worldview, which concludes that reality cannot be exhaustively explained by those criteria alone.

What do the two positions share and where do they part? Both make claims about matters of fact. Both reach beyond the laboratory into meaning, ethics, and destiny.

The naturalist who says the universe is “nothing but” matter in motion has said something that no experiment can establish, because the word “nothing” does the philosophical work. The theist who says the universe is created has likewise said something that reaches past the reach of any single measurement. The two worldviews are therefore commensurable rivals, not a science on one side and a superstition on the other. Because they answer the same three questions, they cannot both be right.

3. The Admission from Within: What Evolution’s Own Advocates Have Conceded

The strongest support for the thesis of this paper comes, not from creationist writers, but from committed evolutionists who have repeatedly and candidly described evolution as functioning as a religion, a myth, or an a priori commitment. These are not hostile witnesses. They are, in several cases, the very figures who have led the public case against creationism. Their testimony is therefore difficult to dismiss as special pleading.

3.1 Michael Ruse

Michael Ruse is a philosopher of biology, a self-described “ardent evolutionist” and ex-Christian. He is also the expert witness whose testimony helped to persuade the court against the Arkansas “balanced treatment” statute in the McLean case. He is, in short, the last person one would expect to make the creationists’ argument for them. Yet in 2000, reviewing evolution for a Canadian newspaper, he wrote that evolution is promoted as more than mere science but is promulgated as an ideology, “*a secular religion, a full-fledged alternative to Christianity, with meaning and morality.*” He then added the sentence that has followed him ever since: on this one complaint, he conceded, “*the literalists are absolutely right. Evolution is a religion.*” [1]

Ruse later sharpened this point in the journal *Science*, where he traced the history of evolutionary thought through three stages and argued that, alongside the professional, mathematical, value-free discipline, there has always run a second stream, sometimes flowing from the same authors, in which evolution is made to underwrite claims about the universe, the meaning of life, and how we ought to behave. This popular evolutionism is often offered as an alternative to religion. [2] He returned to this theme at book length in *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution* (Oxford University Press, 2017). This book explains the tradition from Erasmus Darwin to the present as a secular faith with its own creation story, its own eschatology of progress, and its own moral vision. [3] The honesty of his concession is precisely what gives it force: even the movement’s foremost philosophical defender agrees that what passes for evolution in the public square is religion by another name.

3.2 Julian Huxley and the Religion of Evolutionary Humanism

If Ruse conceded the point reluctantly, Julian Huxley embraced it. Huxley, grandson of Darwin’s champion Thomas Henry Huxley, was among the architects of the modern evolutionary synthesis and the first Director General of UNESCO. He gave his creed its clearest title in the book *Religion Without Revelation* (first published 1927, revised 1957), in which he set out “evolutionary humanism” as a naturalistic **faith** founded on the conviction that humanity can direct its own future. In the evolutionary pattern of thought, he wrote, there is neither need nor room for the supernatural: “*The earth was not created; it evolved.*” [4] Elsewhere he stated flatly that the world is in need of a new religion, and that this religion must be founded on humanist principles, an organized system of ideas and emotions relating man to his destiny that would not be incompatible with scientific knowledge. [5] Huxley did not think he was smuggling religion in under a scientific cover. He thought he was replacing the old religion with a better one built on evolution. That is the cornerstone claim of this paper, stated by evolutionism’s own co-founder.

3.3 Mary Midgley: “The Creation Myth of Our Age”

Mary Midgley, a British moral philosopher and no friend of creationism, devoted an entire book, *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (Methuen, 1985), to the way evolution is pressed into service as, in her memorable phrase, “*the creation myth of our age.*” [6] Her argument is not that Darwinian biology is false, but that it is repeatedly overloaded with metaphysical cargo it cannot carry: prophecies of human destiny, promises of progress up an “evolutionary escalator,” and visions of a transformed future that appear, unannounced, in the closing chapters of otherwise technical books. The theory of evolution, she observed, is not an inert piece of theoretical science; it is also, and cannot help being, a powerful folk-tale about human origins, and any such narrative carries symbolic force. [7] This philosopher, who committed to evolution, thus arrives, from the opposite direction, at the same destination as the creationist: much of what is sold as science is myth.

3.4 Richard Lewontin and A Priori Materialism

Where Ruse, Huxley, and Midgley speak of religion and myth, the Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin exposed the machinery beneath. Reviewing Carl Sagan in *The New York Review of Books*. In 1997, Lewontin explained that scientists take the side of materialism, not because the evidence compels it, but because of their prior philosophical commitment. We are forced, he wrote, by an *a priori* adherence to material causes to construct an apparatus of investigation that yields only material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive. And then the sentence that says the quiet part aloud: “*we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.*”[8]

This is a confession of method. It concedes that naturalism is not a conclusion drawn from the data but a rule imposed even before the data are consulted. A commitment held before evidence and immune to it, is, whatever else it may be, a faith commitment. That is the very structure the same writers deny to the theist.

3.5 E. O. Wilson and Evolution as Myth

The sociobiologist E.O. Wilson, one of the outstanding professional biologists of his generation, provides a final witness, and Ruse himself supplies the citation. In *On Human Nature*, Wilson presented scientific naturalism as a mythology poised to displace traditional religion, arguing that the decisive advantage of the scientific worldview would be its capacity to explain religion itself as a product of evolution and thereby absorb its chief competitor. [2] Here the ambition is explicit: not to sit beside religion but to supersede it, occupying the same ground of ultimate explanation. When a worldview sets out consciously to replace religion in religion’s own office, the label “merely scientific” no longer fits. The pattern is consistent enough to tabulate.

The pattern is consistent enough to tabulate. Table 1 collects the admissions.

Author	Statement in substance	Source
Michael Ruse	Evolution is promulgated as a secular religion; on this point the literalists are right.	National Post, 13 May 2000
Michael Ruse	A “popular evolutionism,” often an alternative to religion, runs alongside the professional science.	Science 299 (2003): 1523–1524
Julian Huxley	Evolutionary humanism is a “religion without revelation”; the world needs a new, humanist religion.	Religion Without Revelation (1957)
Mary Midgley	Evolution functions as “the creation myth of our age.”	Evolution as a Religion (1985)
Richard Lewontin	Materialism is an a priori commitment held prior to the evidence.	New York Review of Books, 9 Jan 1997
E. O. Wilson	Scientific naturalism is a mythology ready to take over from traditional religion.	On Human Nature (1978)

Table 1. Admissions by leading evolutionists that evolution functions as a religion, a myth, or an a priori commitment.

4. Secular Humanism as an Established Religion

If evolution is the cornerstone, Secular Humanism is the building. And on the question of whether Secular Humanism is a religion, the highest court in the United States has already spoken, however inadvertently. In *Torcaso v. Watkins* (1961), the Supreme Court struck down a Maryland requirement that officeholders profess belief in God. In the course of doing so, Justice Black observed in a footnote that, among the religions in this country which do not teach belief in the existence of God, are “*Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others.*” [9] The Court there placed Secular Humanism, by name, in the category of religion. Two things must be said in candor about this footnote which strengthens rather than weakens the Court’s point. First, the remark is dicta: it was not the holding of the case, and no later decision has squarely ruled that Secular Humanism is a religion for every legal purpose. Second, precisely because it is dicta, it is best read, not as a technical ruling, but as a statement of the obvious that slipped out where no one was guarding the door. A worldview that offers an account of origins, a purpose for human life, a moral order, and a hope for the future is doing the work of a religion. And the Court, asked to define religion broadly enough to protect the non-theist, could not avoid saying so.

The self-understanding of the movement points the same way. *The Humanist Manifesto of 1933* described its own program as “religious humanism” and spoke of humanism as a religion fitted to the modern age. Later, humanist statements dropped the vocabulary of religion for strategic reasons, but the underlying structure, a comprehensive naturalistic worldview supplying meaning and morality without God, remained. Evolution supplies that worldview with its origin story. Remove the evolutionary account of where we came from, and Secular Humanism loses its foundation. That is what it means to call evolution the cornerstone of Secular Humanism.

5. The Legal Asymmetry: One Worldview Mandated, the Other Prohibited

The courts have handled the two worldviews in opposite ways, and the sequence is instructive. In *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968), the Supreme Court struck down a state law that forbade the teaching of evolution, holding that the First Amendment does not permit a state to require that teaching be “*tailored to the principles or prohibitions of any religious sect or dogma.*” [10] The naturalistic account was thereby secured a permanent place in the public classroom: a state may not remove it. In *McLean v. Arkansas* (1982) and then in the Supreme Court’s *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987), the courts went further and struck down “balanced treatment” laws that would have required creation science to be taught alongside evolution, holding that the purpose of such laws was to advance a particular religious belief. [11] Finally, in *Kitzmiller v. Dover* (2005), a federal court barred intelligent design from the science curriculum on the same reasoning. [12] Read together, these decisions produce a settled asymmetry. The naturalistic account of origins may not be prohibited and, in practice, must be taught; the theistic account may not be required and, in practice, must be excluded. The result is indoctrination, pure and simple, no different than practiced in totalitarian nations. It is fair to describe the net effect, if not the explicit language of any single opinion, as state-supported entrenchment of one worldview against its rival. Defenders of the rulings answer that the asymmetry is not arbitrary but principled: the courts found, on the evidence before them, that the balanced treatment and intelligent design statutes had a religious purpose, whereas evolution was judged to have only a secular one. That is a serious answer which is taken up in Section 7. But the outcome, whatever its rationale, is that the public science classroom transmits the origin story of one worldview and forbids the origin story of the other worldview. Where the transmission is uniform, compulsory, and one-sided, the word that best describes it is not education but indoctrination.

6. The Transformist Illusion

The naming of this condition is not new. Douglas Dewar, a British lawyer, eminent ornithologist, and Fellow of the Zoological Society who began his career as a convinced evolutionist and ended it as a creationist, called evolution *the Transformist Illusion*, which he used for the title of his 1957 book. [13] By “transformism,” Dewar meant the general thesis of the unlimited transformation of one kind of organism into another, and by “illusion” he meant the confidence in evolution is out of proportion to the evidence with which that thesis is presented to the public as demonstrated fact. Dewar’s point was not that scientists were dishonest, but that a hypothesis had been mistaken for proof, and that the mistake had hardened into an orthodoxy no longer felt to require defense.

The witnesses gathered above suggest that Dewar’s diagnosis was correct. When Ruse concedes popular evolutionism functions as secular religion, Huxley builds a religion on evolution by design, and Midgley finds a creation myth in the last chapters of the textbooks, and Lewontin admits that materialism is fixed before the evidence is weighed, they are describing, from the inside, the very illusion Dewar described from the outside: an unscientific hypothesis, in Dewar’s framing, presented in the dress of scientifically proven truth. The label “science” confers an authority that the underlying worldview claims has not, on its own, earned.

7. Anticipating Objections

First, the equivocation objection. A critic will say that the word “*religion*” is being used in two senses: a strict sense, involving worship, ritual, and the supernatural, which evolution plainly lacks, and a loose sense, meaning any comprehensive worldview or object of deep commitment, in which almost anything can be called a religion. Slide from the loose sense to the strict, and the argument proves too much. The answer is that the argument presented here does not rest on the loose sense alone. The witnesses cited use religious vocabulary in a deliberately strong sense: Huxley calls for ritual and reverence and a “sacred” humanism; Midgley identifies prophecy, myth, and an eschatology of progress; Wilson speaks of a mythology that will explain and supplant its rival.

These are not merely “*deep commitments*.” They are the polythetic marks of religion present in cluster identified in Section 1. The claim is not that natural selection is worship, but that the worldview built upon it carries enough of religion’s defining features to be classed with religion by any consistent definition. What flows from a belief, that is what is being questioned.

Second, Ruse’s own qualification. Ruse has protested that his famous sentence is quoted without its context, and that his protest is legitimate. In the same body of work, he insists that professional evolutionary biology, the mathematical and experimental discipline, is “*no more a secular religion than is industrial chemistry*,” [2] and he does not think creationism should be taught as science. But the qualification concedes exactly the distinction on which this paper depends. Ruse draws a line between professional evolutionism, which is science, and popular evolutionism, which functions as secular religion. The argument here does not target the technical population genetics in the journals. It targets popular evolutionism, the version that reaches the public through textbooks, museums, and documentaries. In her closing chapters, Midgley noticed where the science is extended into a total account of origin, meaning, and destiny. On that version, Ruse and this paper agree. What the public receives is the religion, wearing the prestige of science. The outcome? Naturalism.

Third, the legal purpose objection. A critic will note that the lopsided result in the early court case comes down to what the lawmakers were trying to do, not to a judgment that one worldview is more scientific, or more true, than the other. They were not saying that evolution is more scientific than creationism. That's a fair point, and it should be granted. But it moves the problem rather than solving it. A purpose test asks whether a law advances religion, which presupposes that the court already possesses a workable definition of what counts as religion and what does not. *Torcaso v. Watkins* famously listed *Secular Humanism* among several non-theistic religions in a footnote, although that classification was not itself the core of the case. If a naturalistic worldview can function religiously by providing answers concerning human origins, purpose, morality, and destiny, then a curriculum that exclusively transmits a naturalistic account of origins may also advance a worldview with religious implications. That test does not ordinarily register this possibility, rather it merely restates the asymmetry at a deeper level.

The objection, pressed to its conclusion, therefore returns to the question with which this paper began, namely: What exactly makes one comprehensive account of human origins “religion” and the other “science” when both address many of the same ultimate questions and both necessarily involve philosophical interpretations extending beyond immediately observable facts?

An earlier illustration of this shift from scientific evidence to theological classification is seen in the famous 1925 Scopes Trial, formally titled *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*. John T. Scopes, a young Tennessee teacher, was the defendant. District Attorney Tom Stewart formally led the prosecution, while the nationally prominent William Jennings Bryan served as special counsel for the state. Clarence Darrow acted as the principal attorney for the defense. Scopes was charged under Tennessee’s Butler Act, which prohibited public-school teachers from teaching that humanity had descended from a lower order of animals. The formal legal question was therefore, not whether creation science should be included in a science curriculum, but whether Scopes had taught material forbidden by the statute.

That distinction explains why Judge John Raulston excluded most of the defense’s scientific testimony from consideration by the jury. In the judge’s view, evidence concerning whether evolution was scientifically valid could not change the narrow factual question of whether Scopes had taught the prohibited doctrine. Zoologist Maynard Metcalf was permitted to give testimony outside the jury’s presence, and written statements from other scientific experts were preserved for the appellate record, so it would be inaccurate to say that absolutely no science entered the proceedings. Nevertheless, the jury was largely prevented from weighing the scientific evidence that the defense had assembled. The trial was nominally about the teaching of evolution, yet the merits of evolutionary theory were not permitted to become the central factual issue before the jury.

Once the scientific testimony had been restricted, Darrow called Bryan himself to the stand as a witness on the Bible. Bryan was not the defendant; he was an attorney for the prosecution who voluntarily submitted to questioning. Darrow then interrogated him about Jonah and the great fish, Joshua’s long day, Noah’s Flood, the age of the Earth, Bishop Ussher’s chronology, Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib, Cain’s wife, the serpent in Eden, the rainbow after the Flood, and the meaning of the Creation days in Genesis. Bryan did not, in fact, insist that the Creation days were literal twenty-four-hour periods. He stated that he regarded them as periods of unspecified length and believed that the Earth was considerably older than a few thousand years. This is what was attacked, nothing scientific or that, in creation science. Nevertheless, the significance of the exchange remains. Darrow did not test evolution by presenting evidence concerning mutations,

natural selection, fossils, genetics, geology, or common descent. He only attacked the intellectual credibility of one man's view on the Biblical worldview associated with opposition to evolution. Bryan himself recognized the change in subject, declaring that the defense had come not merely to try Scopes, but to put “*revealed religion*” on trial. The questions directed at Bryan were therefore theological and hermeneutical rather than scientific. They tested his interpretation of Genesis, his acceptance of Biblical miracles, and his ability to answer familiar objections to Scripture raised by skeptics.

This rhetorical strategy was extraordinarily effective. Instead of requiring the defense to establish the scientific adequacy of evolution, it placed Bryan’s Biblical beliefs under public cross-examination. The underlying contest was transformed from a dispute over empirical evidence for evolution into a judgment concerning whether a particular understanding of Scripture appeared intellectually respectable and defensible. The naturalistic assumptions associated with evolution remained largely outside the theological examination, while the Christian assumptions associated with opposition to evolution were placed directly under it. That is the deeper asymmetry. One worldview was treated as a collection of religious commitments requiring exposure, interrogation, and justification; the other was permitted to function as the religiously neutral background against which those commitments were judged. The decisive question is, therefore, not merely why creationist legislation failed a judicial purpose test. It is why the philosophical commitments of creationism are immediately visible to the court as worldview commitments, while the philosophical commitments that govern an exclusively naturalistic account of origins are rendered invisible by being classified in advance as science not available for examination.

Until that prior classification is defended rather than assumed, the distinction between neutral science and prohibited religion risks becoming not the conclusion of the constitutional analysis, but its unacknowledged premise. This was Charles Lyell's goal long ago: to get rid of the sciences of Moses without the public even noticing. That hidden agenda was fulfilled, and no one was the wiser.

8. Conclusion

The question “*Is creationism religion?*” cannot be answered without answering a prior question: What is religion, and by that standard, what is evolution? Once religion is defined as the philosophy of the field required, polythetically, by a cluster of features rather than a single test, the clean division between a religious creationism and a purely scientific evolution does not survive contact with the evidence. The evidence includes the plain words of the movement’s own leaders. An ardent evolutionist calls evolution a religion. A founder of the modern synthesis builds a religion upon it. A philosopher committed to Darwin calls it the creation myth of our age. A distinguished geneticist admits that its materialism is fixed in advance of the data. And the Supreme Court, asked to define religion broadly enough to be fair, lists Secular Humanism among the religions.

This paper has not argued that evolution has been falsified. What it shows is narrower and more unsettling: that the public settlement, which teaches one worldview is science and forbids the other as religion, is not the neutral arrangement it presents itself to be. It is the establishment, in the classroom and in the culture, of a particular answer to the deepest human questions. To call that answer “science” and its rival “religion” is, in Dewar’s enduring phrase, to trade in the Transformist Illusion. The honest course is to recognize both accounts for what they are, rival worldviews with religious weight, and to let them be examined as such, in the open, on their own merits.

References

- [1] Ruse, M. (2000, May 13). How evolution became a religion: Creationists correct? Darwinians wrongly mix science with morality, politics. *National Post*, pp. B1, B3, B7.
- [2] Ruse, M. (2003). Is evolution a secular religion? *Science*, 299(5612), 1523–1524. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1082968>
- [3] Ruse, M. (2017). *Darwinism as religion: What literature tells us about evolution*. Oxford University Press.
- [4] Huxley, J. (1957). *Religion without revelation* (rev. ed.). Harper & Brothers. (Original work published 1927.)
- [5] Huxley, J. (1964). *Essays of a humanist*. Harper & Row.
- [6] Midgley, M. (1985). *Evolution as a religion: Strange hopes and stranger fears*. Methuen.
- [7] Midgley, M. (1987). Evolution as a religion: A comparison of prophecies. *Zygon*, 22(2), 179–194. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.1987.tb00845.x>
- [8] Lewontin, R. C. (1997, January 9). Billions and billions of demons [Review of the book *The Demon-Haunted World*, by C. Sagan]. *The New York Review of Books*, 44(1), 31.
- [9] *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488, 495 n.11 (1961).
- [10] *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1968).
- [11] *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education*, 529 F. Supp. 1255 (E.D. Ark. 1982); *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578 (1987).
- [12] *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, 400 F. Supp. 2d 707 (M.D. Pa. 2005).
- [13] Dewar, D. (1957). *The transformist illusion*. Dehoff Publications.