

A Magisterial Mutualism

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Organisms from Molecules to the Environment

American Institute of Biological Sciences

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Despite repeated court decisions establishing that creationism in all of its guises has no place in public school science classrooms, the public's perception of the evolution-creation controversy persists. In short, a significant portion of the public remains sympathetic toward creationism, believes evolution conflicts with their religious beliefs, and is woefully misinformed about the basics of evolutionary theory.

The situation is not surprising, given the relentless attention paid to evolution by many on the religious right. Religious fundamentalists have been very clear about their message: religion and evolution are not compatible. Indeed, citizens are constantly told that they must choose between religion and science. Because the vast majority of people consider themselves to be religious, many will opt for religion when presented with this choice.

If progress is to be made on this front, scientists must adopt new strategies and forge meaningful alliances with new allies. The Clergy Letter Project (CLP) (www.evolutionsunday.org) serves as a model of the necessary collaborative effort.

The CLP began with a short letter, written by a Christian minister, asserting that the dichotomy between religion and science presented by fundamentalists was false. The letter concludes with the following plea: "We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth."

The Clergy Letter, written from a Christian perspective, has now been endorsed by more than 11,000 members of the Christian clergy, demonstrating that thousands of Christian leaders have taken a public stand in support of evolution and high-quality science education.

Many of these leaders have also participated in the first two annual "Evolution Sunday" events sponsored by the CLP. Scheduled on the Sunday closest to the anniversary of Darwin's birth (12 February 1809), these events have provided an opportunity for congregations worldwide to discuss the compatibility of science and religion and to elevate the quality of discourse on this important topic. In an attempt to be more welcoming to members of all religions, in 2008 Evolution Sunday becomes "Evolution Weekend."

The clergy associated with the CLP have opted to play a very public and often controversial role in defense of their religious beliefs and in support of evolutionary science. These brave men and women, however, are looking for support from the scientific community—a place to turn when they have technical questions. In response, the CLP has created a list of scientific consultants (www.butler.edu/clergyproject/rel_expert_data_base.htm) who constitute a growing resource for the clergy.

By demonstrating that scientists and religious leaders can work together productively, we can convince the public that those who demand a choice between religion and science are ill informed. Even if you don't join the CLP's list, I urge you to consider other ways to promote scientific literacy by building bridges to members of religious communities. Science literacy is too important to be left solely to religious leaders.

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