The Public’s Comments About Susan Epperson’s Challenge of the Arkansas Anti-Evolution Law: Have Feelings Changed?

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ABSTRACT: There was a strong response by the public to Susan Epperson's historic challenge of the Arkansas anti-evolution law in the 1960s. The public's responses stressed several themes, including that 1) evolution is "only a theory," 2) truth about nature is found in God's word rather than science, 3) people are uncomfortable with sharing a common ancestor with apes, 4) the teaching of evolution produces societal ills, and 5) evolution upsets many people's views of race relations. Many of these responses by the public to evolution remain common today.

KEYWORDS: Creationism, Epperson v. Arkansas, Evolution, Susan Epperson

I don’t think the world changes very rapidly.
John Scopes, 1966

In 1964, Susan Epperson accepted a job as a biology teacher at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Soon thereafter, Epperson faced a dilemma: she could either obey the state's anti-evolution law (passed in 1928 in a public referendum) and not teach evolution to her students, or she could teach evolution to her students and commit a crime. Epperson, refusing to compromise her course, decided to challenge the law. Her challenge -- the first legal test of an anti-evolution law since the trial of John Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925 -- culminated in 1968 in the Epperson v. Arkansas decision by the US Supreme Court. Epperson v. Arkansas changed science teaching in public schools by legalizing the teaching of evolution and strengthening academic freedom (for a discussion of the history of the Arkansas antievolution law, see Moore 1999, 2002a). Although Epperson v. Arkansas was decided more than 30 years ago, its lessons remain important for teachers, students, parents, and administrators. Epperson v. Arkansas also allows us to determine how many of the public's perceptions about evolution in the 1960s persist.

Not surprisingly, Epperson was attacked by a variety of fundamentalists and religious groups, despite the fact that her attorney had issued a statement proclaiming that Epperson was a Christian, that her husband Jon was in the military, and that both were "beyond reproach morally" (for details about Epperson v. Arkansas, see Moore 2002a). Hundreds of people wrote to Susan. Before her case ended, Susan received stacks of pamphlets having titles such as Darwin’s Confusion, Hell - Is It Real?, The Races of Mankind, Christ Is What You Need, God Was Right - Darwin Was Wrong, Evolution Is The Basis of Communism, Are Evolutionists Intelligent?, Evolution Is Anti-Christian, and Yes - It’s a Sick World. Despite her statement and life’s work to the contrary, people questioned Susan's religious beliefs. Although most people who wrote to Susan had no understanding of evolution, they somehow knew that it was incompatible with their religious beliefs, and was therefore “wrong.” People from all over the country sent articles and letters to Susan, most of which were either positive or neutral:

- I hope you win your case because students should know the truth. - John Roberts, 9 December 1965
- It has always been my firm belief that our schools were instituted to teach the principles of truth. - Floyd E. Nutt, letter to editor, “Teaching Evolution” (Arkansas Gazette, 27 December 1965)
- Teachers ... have the responsibility and obligation to offer information that can help students ... reach intelligent conclusions. - Richard Hoover, letter to the editor, “Evolution...
A Fundamental of Life” (Arkansas Gazette, 3 January 1966)

- Science does not proclaim to have all truth, and we should hope it never does for it would then cease to seek truth and thereby become stagnant and lifeless. - Homer Anderson, for the Quacita County Board of Education, 27 May (no year listed)

Epperson also received many letters that criticized her motives, opposed her actions, vilified her character, and offered advice for salvation. Those letters stressed several themes:

**Truth about nature is found in God’s word, not science.**
- All you have to do is go to God’s Word. - M.T. Stout, 2 April 1966
- If you have the desire to teach evolution, I suggest you destroy disbelief in evolution with God’s word. – Charles J. Green, undated letter.
- I doubt very much that you have read the Bible. – I.S. Graves, 2 September 1966
- If you will investigate the Bible thoroughly you will not want to teach this theory. – W.O. Batten, 30 December 1965
- Jesus Christ DID NOT believe in evolution. – Alice Moore, 4 April 1966
- If you will take the word of God you won’t need any more books. - Brad Brower, 9 December 1965
- There is enough ungodliness in this wicked world already without creating more … Oh you animals of little mind, so why don’t you turn to God wholly? – Don Chesney, 13 December 1965
- When you teach that the bible [sic] lies ... or rather that God Him Sel [sic] lies ... you are treading on dangerous ground. The Bible says ... that ‘and the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrals [sic] the breath of life; and man became a living soul’. Now what are you going to do with that verse? - Mrs. A.T. Farmer, 2 April 1966
- The theory of evolution tampers with the truth. - Felicia, letter to the editor, Johnson County Graphic (Clarksville), 20 January 1966
- I know you can’t teach the Bible in school but you could leave out Darwin’s theory. - Mrs. R.B. Boland, 4 April 1966
- Why would you want to go to such extremes to teach something which contradicts the truth? Also that would confuse the children. For the truth of creation teach Genesis. - Mrs. R.B. Boland, 4 April 1966

**Evolution is only a theory.**
- If evolution is true, then it should be taught, but since it is only a theory, why teach it? - W.O. Batten, 30 December 1965
- The theory of evolution is only a theory. The Bible and god are facts. - Anonymous
- Evolution is still an unproven theory, while the Bible can be proven as it relates to creation. - Mark Parker, 20 January 1966
- [The Bible] would do our young people a great deal more good than the ever changing THEORY of evolution. “Ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” II Timothy 3:7. - Roland C. Parkey, Sr., 31 January 1966
- The theory of evolution is only a theory. The Bible and God are facts. – Anonymous, undated letter.

**People are uncomfortable with -- and even offended by -- sharing a common ancestor with apes.**
- ... if you want to claim relation to the ugly apes go right ahead ... - Flo Evans, August 1966
- Go on and visit your kin and swing from the trees with them, but I am proud God created me. – Anonymous, 4 April 1966
- You go right ahead Mrs. Epperson and teach the ugly theory of evolution – because from the way you looked on TV it could be true that man and woman did evolve from apes. – Mrs. William Harshaw, 2 April 1966
- Having seen your picture it is easy to understand why you would want to argue and teach that you evolved from this lineage. – John Jones, undated letter
- No wonder you want Arkansas to let you teach evolution in school; to look at you and your old Dad any one would think you and he both started from a big old baboon. He looks like one and you look like a tailless monkey… American needs Bible teachers not things like you … I pity your Mother for giving birth to such a girl. – Anonymous, undated letter
- I am sure you are not aware of the Havoc you are causing among the young with your Darwin theory, teaching ... As United States is mostly Christians, this is an affront to Christians, and in favor of the atheists, it is about time that Christians rise up and demand recognition for their beliefs. The Bible reading was removed as an affront to the atheists, well this Darwin theory is an affront to the Christian, and we are footing the bills for the nation. Even the Jew would object to being descended from a monkey, as it sure would not fit their religious views. Not knowing you, it could be true, in your case, but why brag about it, you are proving it. - Anonymous, undated letter
People do not understand evolution.

- Will you please tell your class why monkeys have quit turning into Human Beings? I would also like to know why. – Mrs. J. Henry Dunn, 9 September 1965
- There is absolutely no foundation whatsoever for the belief in evolution … People still produce people, cats produce a cat, dogs a dog, birds a bird, monkeys a monkey, etc. I beg of you to get down on your knees and cry out to God to give you wisdom and understanding. – Mrs. Parker, 15 March 1966
- Now, if man came from monkey, it seems the monkey would be no more. Or, else monkeys would still be having men and men giving birth to monkeys. - Mrs. Gene Watson, 20 January 1966

Epperson’s legal victory was another bad decision by the U.S. court system.2

- I have no doubt if the matter were referred to the Supreme Court, they are just stupid and wacky enough to support your contention. Surely their decisions seem to more and more favor the criminal element. – Victor Vian, 12 February 1966

The teaching of evolution will have dire consequences.

- If freedom is given to discuss [evolution], license to teach it as a fact will be taken. Destroy faith in the Bible and others will follow. - Rev. George Payne, letter to the editor, “Evolution Debate is On Again” (Johnson County Graphic [Clarksville], 16 December 1965)
- Why do you want to ruin the minds of the young? – Anonymous, undated letter
- If you want to not believe in the Bible and go to Hell, well old Monkey Sis, you Just [sic] think that way ... - Anonymous, undated letter
- I cannot stand people who deny and go up against God. Go on, teach evolution and may God have mercy on your soul. We will live to see the day when ... others will [go] to hell and you will go there also. Remember you will stand before God and it may not be long. - Anonymous, undated letter

Many people equated the teaching of evolution with atheism and communism.

- Communism is laughing on the inside as they see so many Americans like you bringing destruction on our Country of Freedom ... Evolution is another attack on God. Jazz and rock and roll music in the house of God ... [Your] picture in the paper nauseated God. – Anonymous
- [You are] selling out to atheistic motivators ... think of how the Satanic forces of communism must laugh. – Isabelle Larkins, undated letter
- The communists and every other group which wants to destroy our Great Republic, U.S.A., will back you against God … May God have mercy on your soul. – Malcolm Brown, 11 February 1966

The teaching of evolution upset many people’s views of civil rights and race-relations.

- And as for Faubus - who used National Guard troops to prevent integration of Little Rock Central High School in 1958 -- he probably finds the theory [of evolution] distasteful because, among other reasons, it implies that Negroes and Caucasians came from the same ancestor. - Editorial: Arkansas Begins Fight for Freedom to Teach (Ohio State Lantern, 21 January 1966).
- I can imagine you refer to the Negroes, if so I agree. One of many things makes me mad is the Welfare Dept. pays Negroes to increase their population by leaps and bounds ... Should this actually enter court, it will sure scramble the Civil Rights Bill, I hope. - Thurman Pate, 1 May 1966
- If Forrest Rozzell and the rest of them coconut-heads [sic] up there want to believe there [sic] forefathers [sic] are monkeys, apes, or gorillas, its [sic] OK, but don’t let them shove it down our throat like Johnson did the Civil Rights Law ... If I was a teacher, the first nigger that walked in my classroom I would walk out ... and don’t think I wouldn’t [sic]. - Anonymous letter, 7 December 1966
- P.S. I’m white too. - David Smith, “Easter Sunday 1966”

These comments about evolution and racism are especially interesting when viewed in the context of Epperson v. Arkansas. Epperson v. Arkansas started at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, site of the infamous racial turmoil surrounding school segregation in 1957-1959. Although the turmoil quieted in 1959 when the school reluctantly admitted a few black students, racial undercurrents were still

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2 Epperson v. Arkansas came soon after a variety of other controversial decisions by the Supreme Court, including Engel v. Vitale (370 U.S. 421), which banned state-sponsored prayer, and Abington Township School District v. Schempp (374 U.S. 203), which banned state-sponsored Bible reading. After Epperson v. Arkansas, just as after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision (349 U.S. 294), larger numbers of parents began sending their children to private schools (see discussion in Moore, 2001).
prevalent when Susan’s lawsuit began. The controversy surrounding Epperson’s case tapped many people’s ideas about racism and was often viewed as an affront to the “Southern Way.” To many, Susan was a Yankee carpetbagger trying to force another reconstruction – this one being an intellectual one involving the public schools -- on the South (e.g., see Irons 1988).

The public’s comments about evolution and race (see above) provide insights for understanding how some people link evolution, creationism, and race. Indeed, several creationists had endorsed the special creation of blacks as separate from (and inferior to) whites. Such links of creationism to racism have a long history:

Numerous creationists have used the Bible to “show conclusively that Negroes and the white race do not have a common ancestry” (e.g., Dickey, 1958, Odeneal, 1958).

The Ku Klux Klan and similar racist groups, which believed that genetic differences between races are biological determinants of value and destiny, gave the antievolution movement powerful support (de Camp, 1968). As noted in the movie Q Brother, Where Art Thou?, the Klan wanted to ban the teaching of evolution.

William Jennings Bryan was, like many in his era, “a convinced white supremacist” who endorsed Klansmen in elections, supported by the Klan, and was supported by the Klan (de Camp, 1968, Ashby, 1987, Bryan here Saturday, 1924, Chalmers, 1965). When Bryan died five days after the Scopes “monkey trial” in Dayton, Tennessee, the Ku Klux Klan burned crosses in Bryan’s memory, praised Bryan as “The Greatest Klansman of Our Time” (despite the fact that Bryan was not a Klansman), and tried to assume the mantle of Bryan’s anti-evolution, pro-creationism cause (Coletta 1969; Cherny 1985; Moore 1998). A separate origin for whites and blacks -- as could be gleaned from creationism but not evolution -- was critical (and remains critical) to the Klan’s message (e.g., see discussion in Moore, 2001).

Prominent fundamentalists and antievolutionists such as Billy Sunday, J. Frank Norris, Bob Jones, Sr., and Bob Shuler were supported by and were supportive of the Ku Klux Klan.

Edward Clarke, Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, proclaimed that by 1927 “there will be lighted in this country countless bonfires, devouring those damnable and detestable books on evolution” (Numbers 1998).

Racist magazines such as Defender published articles by anti-evolution evangelists such as George McReady Price and William Bell Riley. Today, a significant percentage of US students continue to believe that "the color of a person’s skin depends on whether God favored or punished their ancestors" (Lawson and Worsnop, 1992).

Conversely, Henry Morris and other creationists have claimed that racism was produced by evolutionary theory. As Morris noted in The Troubled Waters of Evolution (Morris, 1984),

As the 19th century scientists were converted to evolution, they were thus also convinced of racism. They were certain that the white race was superior to other races, and the reason for this superiority was to be found in Darwinian theory.

Recent Events indicate that the antievolution sentiment of the 1960’s continue to be held today.

The public’s comments about Epperson’s attempt to legalize the teaching of evolution continue to represent the beliefs of many people who oppose the teaching of evolution. Indeed, it is common to encounter people who equate evolution with atheism, reject the fact that humans and apes share a common ancestor, trivialize evolution as “just a theory,” believe that evolution produces immorality, and link the teaching of evolution with social ills such as violence and racism. For example,

In 1999, House Republican Whip Tom DeLay linked the teaching of evolution with school shootings, birth control, and abortion (Mr. DeLay’s Power Play, 1999). More recently, DeLay announced that God is using him to promote “a biblical worldview” based on only Christianity offering reasonable answers to questions about origins (Cooperman, 2002).

Creation science icon Henry Morris (1989) claims that “evolutionism” is responsible for abortion and a decline in morality.

The Louisiana Committee for Science Standards groups evolution with subjects such as incest, the occult, witchcraft, and drug use as topics that should be banned from the state exit exam for its high school students (Moore, 2002a).

In Kentucky, topics such as evolution and gun control violate the state’s “sensitivity guidelines” and “may not be suitable for assessment items” on the state assessment test (Moore, 2002a).

In 2001, Louisiana State Representative Sharon Broome introduced a resolution urging the state legislature to “reject the core concepts of...
Darwinist ideology” because they are racist (Good, 2002).

The ongoing persistence of these misconceptions (e.g., it’s “only a theory”) contribute to why so many teachers present evolution poorly (or not at all) in their classes, why most people favor creationism being given “equal time” in science classes, and why many people are so uncomfortable with the topic (e.g., see Moore 2002a, 2002b).

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REFERENCES

Call For Resolutions
The Steering Committee of ACUBE requests that the membership submit resolutions for consideration at the 2002 Annual meeting to the Chair of the Resolutions Committee. Submit proposed resolutions to:

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