

Back to the Garden

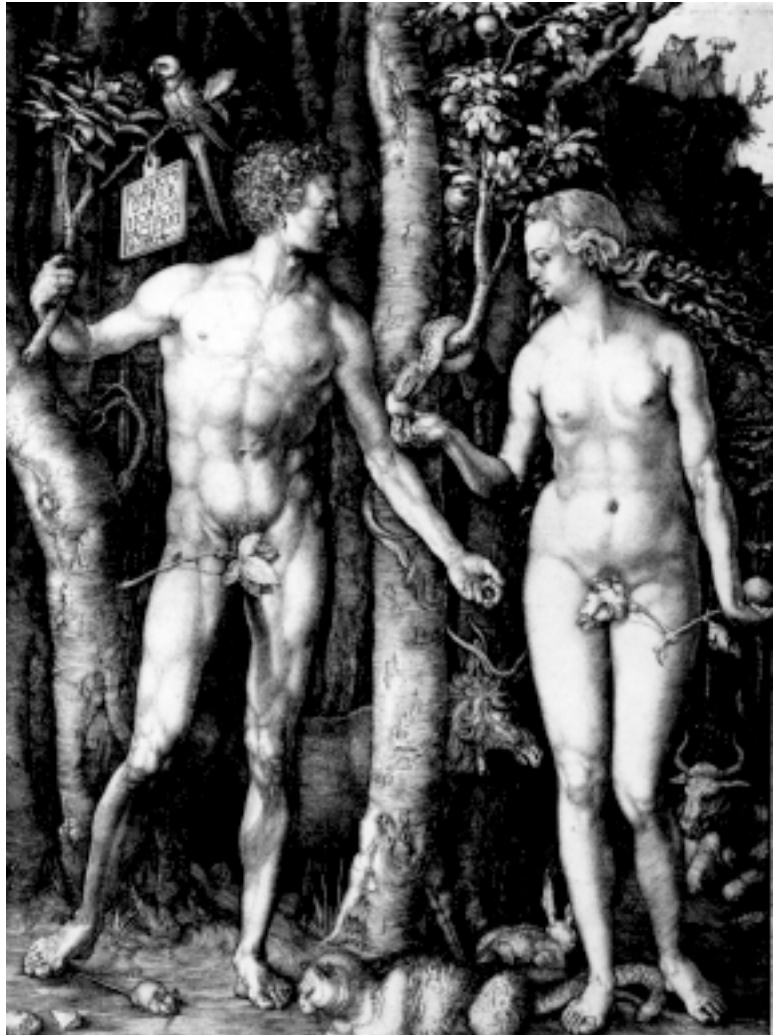
By George Bishop

When the Kansas Board of Education downgraded the teaching of evolution in public schools last August, it marked just the latest battle in a long-standing, uniquely American controversy dating from the hot summer days of the Scopes “monkey trial,” seventy-five years ago. The creation-evolution debate also became part of the 2000 presidential campaign, when candidates George Bush and Al Gore both said they supported the teaching of creationism along with evolution in public schools if that’s what the citizens of Kansas wanted to do—a harbinger of the role religion would come to play in the election calculus of Campaign 2000. God, as the pundits might put it, is alive and well in American politics.

So, too, is the biblically based belief that God created human beings in their present form within the last 10,000 years. According to the most recent Gallup poll on beliefs about human origins, conducted shortly after the Kansas controversy erupted, nearly half (47%) of adult Americans believes in this literalist, creationist account. Another 40% believes that, while human beings may have evolved over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, God guided this process. Barely one in ten (9%) believes the naturalistic position of modern science that human evolution has occurred without divine intervention. The rest (4%) say they just “don’t know.”

Even more remarkable from the perspective of scientific and academic com-

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Albrecht Durer's Adam and Eve - Philadelphia Museum of Art

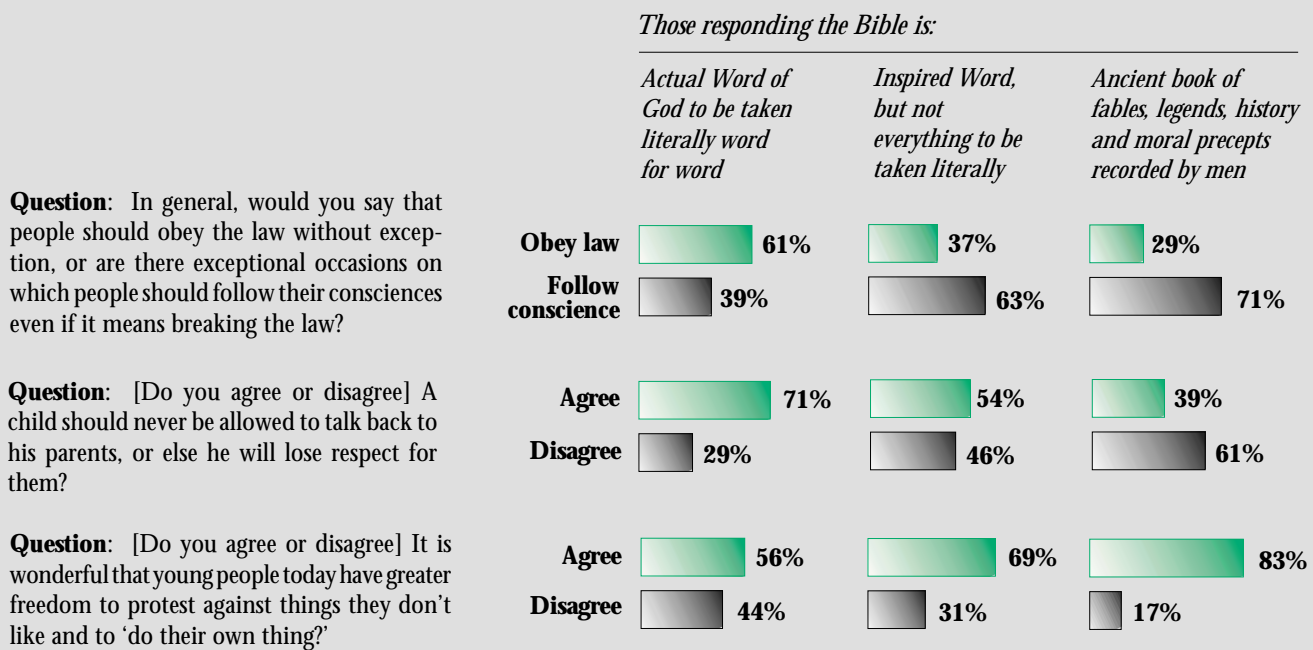
munities is that these Gallup findings have remained essentially unchanged since the question about human origins was first asked nearly twenty years ago—and this despite the ever-rising percentage of college graduates in the American population. So while progressive sources of theological authority, such as Pope John Paul II, may now believe that “evolution is more than just a hypothesis,” for nearly half the adult public in this country the authority of the Bible on this question remains an article of faith. And therein lies a clue as to why so many Americans

continue to believe in the creationist account of human origins: the authoritarian syndrome—an inclination to be influenced by trusted authorities in our lives.

Perhaps no clearer expression of the authoritarian syndrome of creationist beliefs can be found than in the monthly newsletter *Answers Update*, published by the evangelistic organization Answers in Genesis. The newsletter proudly proclaims on its masthead that it is “equipping Christians to defend the authority of the Bible from

Figure 1

Biblical Literalists Have Greater Regard for Authority



Question: In general, would you say that people should obey the law without exception, or are there exceptional occasions on which people should follow their consciences even if it means breaking the law?

Question: [Do you agree or disagree] A child should never be allowed to talk back to his parents, or else he will lose respect for them?

Question: [Do you agree or disagree] It is wonderful that young people today have greater freedom to protest against things they don't like and to 'do their own thing?'

Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey, combined data sets 1972-98.

the very first verse.” In its November 1999 issue, entitled “The Final Authority—In What?” executive director Ken Ham, who, according to the *New York Times*, has become the most prominent “creationist captain” in the movement, argues that “the Bible is not just the final authority in all matters of faith and practice—it is in reality the final authority in *all matters* it touches on... geology, biology, astronomy, history, zoology, etc....”¹

It all sounds like a page out of the past, a verbatim quote from a case study in T.W. Adorno et al.’s classic work, *The Authoritarian Personality*. And well it should, when one looks at the research program of social psychologist Bob Altemeyer, who has revitalized the study of authoritarianism and its relationship to religion and politics in North America. Creationist beliefs about human origins are essentially an expression of biblical literalism, which itself is a manifestation of what Altemeyer and his protégé, Bruce

Hunsberger, have identified as religious fundamentalism—“the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, inerrant truth about humanity and deity....”² In a series of investigations Altemeyer and Hunsberger have demonstrated that fundamentalism can best be viewed as a religious manifestation of *authoritarian conservatism*, a key element of which is a predisposition to submit to the perceived legitimate and established authorities in society—such as parents, teachers, civic officials and religious leaders—and, by extension, to the inerrant, literalist authority of the Bible, insofar as it is emphasized by the trusted authorities in one’s life.

Further evidence for the link between biblical literalism and authoritarianism comes from the NORC General Social Survey’s questions about attitudes toward authority (see Figure 1). Biblical literalists are much more likely than those who think

of the Bible as either “the inspired word of God” or “a book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by men” to say that “people should obey the law without exception;” to agree that a “child should never talk back to his parents;” and to disagree with the idea that “It is wonderful that young people today have greater freedom to protest against things they don’t like and to ‘do their own thing.’” Biblical literalists and creationists also turn up much more frequently in those social and demographic groups in the population who historically have occupied the lower rungs of the dominance hierarchy in American society and who therefore have had to submit to the religious doctrines of the established (and often white male) authorities: African-Americans, women, and the less educated, especially those socialized in the “Bible belt” of the American South, where that legacy lingers today.

Beliefs about the authority of the Bible and religious belief in general largely reflect the effects of socialization. The vast majority of people, as Hunsberger and other social psychologists of religion have shown, usually end up adopting the religious beliefs (or non-beliefs) of Mom and Dad. We believe, in other words, largely because that is what the *parental authorities* in our lives believed. Furthermore, the single best predictor of whether or not one ends up accepting parental religious beliefs is the extent to which religion is emphasized and modeled at home.³ This is the lion's share of the social psychologist's answer to the question: Why do people believe in God, the afterlife, the authority of the Bible, and other religious notions? *Because that is what most of the trusted authorities in my life—my parents, ministers, priests and teachers—have told me is true.*

And when the “expert authority” of the Gallup Poll reports that nearly all Americans (95%) believe in God, that the vast majority (80 to 85%) believes in life after death, and that nearly half believes in the authority of the Bible on the question of human origins, it reinforces what all those authorities have told us is true for most of our lives and cements our membership in the American tribe: you are one of us. It also reinforces the “spiral of silence” for those Americans who may be hesitant to express agnostic or atheistic beliefs for fear of giving offense to, and becoming isolated from, that purported “vast majority.”

Psychological studies of religion also tell us that people hold fast to their religious beliefs and practices throughout life because they provide a source of social support and a buffer against the inevitable stresses of our day-to-day existence; because they offer an explanation of the meaning of life and the universe; and because they give us hope and comfort in facing the deaths


of loved ones as well as our own mortality.⁴ The doctrines of religion may all be an illusion that pervades the conscious contents of a defense mechanism for the denial of death, as Freud and other psychodynamic theorists have contended, but such doctrines are nonetheless deeply consoling for most of us in bearing the unfairness of life's crosses, giving us a sense of control over the unpredictability of our natural and social worlds. These are the most familiar, plausible, and *proximate* psychological reasons people believe in God, life after death, the Bible, and the like.

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But beyond this, why do we as human beings want to believe or hope about anything? This is a question about the *ultimate* sources of religious belief, one that has become of late the province of evolutionary psychologists and sociobiologists, such as E.O. Wilson, who argue that religious beliefs and submission to divine authority exist and persist largely because they have had survival value in the evolutionary history of our species. By meeting the universal human needs to cope with the fear of death, to hope for an afterlife with loved ones—where life's unfairness and injustices are rectified—and to give meaning to it all, religious beliefs and practices confer an adaptive advantage to those clans, tribes, and cultures unified in such doctrines. As Wilson puts it, “There is a hereditary selective advantage to membership in a powerful group united by devout belief and purpose.... Much if not all religious be-

havior could have arisen by natural selection.”⁵

In the same vein, anthropologist Lionel Tiger argues that religion, which appears to crop up universally across cultures and historical periods, is fundamentally about hope, and that “optimism is a biological phenomenon; since religion is deeply intertwined with optimism.... Religion is a biological phenomenon rooted in our genes....”⁶

How fitting that the descendants of the evolutionary theory of human origins discovered by Darwin, which has generated so much controversy in American society since the Scopes trial, should now tell us about the biological roots of the belief in God, the afterlife, the Bible, and other religious doctrines. 

Endnotes

¹K. Ham, “The Final Authority—In What?” *Answers Update* 1999, Vol. 6, No. 9, pp. 1-3.

²B. Altemeyer and B. Hunsberger, “Authoritarianism, Religious Fundamentalism, Quest, and Prejudice,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 113-133.

³B. Altemeyer and B. Hunsberger, *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith and Others Abandon Religion* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997).

⁴B. Hunsberger, “Social-Psychological Causes of Faith,” *Free Inquiry* 1999, Vol. 19, pp. 34-37.

⁵E. O. Wilson, *Consilience* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998), p. 258.

⁶L. Tiger, *Optimism: The Biology of Hope* (New York: Kodansha International, 1999).