

A scientist's view

by Richard Dawkins

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The Rome-deniers, let's imagine, are a well-organised group of nutters, implacably convinced that the Roman empire never existed. The Latin language, for all its rich literature and its romance language grandchildren, is a Victorian fabrication.

The Rome-deniers are, no doubt, harmless wingnuts, more harmless than the Holocaust-deniers whom they resemble. Smile and be tolerant. But your tolerance might wear thin if you are a scholar and teacher of Roman history or literature.

And what if Rome-deniers manage to infiltrate the teaching staff of an otherwise reputable school, and energetically promote their inanities to a susceptible new generation? A normally tolerant person could be forgiven for wanting to see those teachers fired.

Well, that's approximately where I stand with respect to the clique of Genesis creationists who have moved in on Emmanuel College, Gateshead. What they deny is the unassailable evidence for biological evolution. The present head of the school, Nigel McQuoid, with his predecessor John Burn, wrote the following: "We agree that [schools] should teach evolution as a theory and faith position... Clearly also schools should teach the creation theory as literally depicted in Genesis. Both creation and evolution provide ways of explaining the past that are beyond direct scientific examination and verification. Ultimately, both creation and evolution are faith positions."

The vice-principal, head of science, senior assessment coordinator and maths teacher, have all said something similar.

Creation as literally depicted in Genesis is indeed supported by faith (and needs to be, since it is not supported by anything else, certainly not the Pope, nor the Roman or Anglican hierarchies). Evolution, on the other hand, is supported by evidence.

Any science teacher who denies that the world is billions (or even millions!) of years old is teaching children a preposterous, mind-shrinking falsehood. These men disgrace the honourable profession of teacher. By comparison, real teachers, teachers who respect truth and evidence whether in science or history, have so much more to offer. Today's children are blessed with the opportunity to open their minds to the shattering wonder of their own existence, the nature of life and its remarkable provenance in a yet more remarkable universe. Teachers who help to open young minds perform a duty which is as near sacred as I will admit. Ignorant, closed-minded, false teachers who stand in their way come as close as I can reckon to committing true sacrilege.

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