

Conference on Darwin, Humanism and Science - Report

5 June 2009

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1E 6HD

This conference was jointly sponsored by the EHF, the British Humanist Association (BHA), the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) the South Place Ethical Society (SPES) to celebrate 'Darwin 200' – the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of 'On the Origin of Species'.

See here an enthusiastic report on a blog about the conference.

PROGRAMME

10.00

Welcome from Polly Toynbee, president of the BHA **10.15 – 11.15**

'Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution'

Professor Richard Dawkins

Charles Darwin, born 200 years ago, is arguably Britain's greatest contribution to science and his 'On the Origin of Species', 150 years old in 2009, changed the way we think about life on earth. The theory of evolution has been repeatedly confirmed by evidence and continues to shape our understanding of biology. Professor Dawkins offered his own perspective on Charles Darwin and his world-changing ideas. [See it on You-Tube](#)

11.15 – 11.45

Coffee and Tea

11.45 – 12.15

Teaching of evolution in European schools

Professor Charles Susanne, Free University of Brussels, Belgium

Some have the impression that the creationist actions and the obscurantist attacks against the concepts of evolution are essentially of American origin. But, Europe is unfortunately not free of this threat and there have been numerous recent political decisions taken to forbid the teaching of evolution. There are threats to the teaching of evolution in countries historically Catholic such as Lithuania, Cyprus, Italy or Poland; in countries historically Protestant, such as the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom; in countries historically Orthodox, such as Greece, Russia, and Serbia as well as in Turkey, from Muslim sources.

12.15 – 12.45

Insidious Creationism: the intellectual abuse of children through creationist books, comics and literature

James Williams, University of Sussex, England

The science education curriculum in the UK does not fully engage students with the theory of evolution until late in their schooling (ages 14-16). Creationists expend a lot of time, money and energy influencing primary age children with comic books, magazines and videos that contain creation pseudoscience with some elements of real science. By promoting their tales of vegetarian T. rex in the garden of Eden and on Noah's ark as factual and the mixing of real science with pseudoscience, creationist misconceptions are embedded in children's minds at an early age. Research shows that established misconceptions are difficult to overcome. This wilful distortion of real science in favour of pseudoscience is nothing less than intellectual abuse. While creationists have a right to publish and voice their views, no matter how far from real science they may be, the science education community

must respond by introducing evolution and the reality of how life developed and diversified much earlier in the curriculum to combat the establishment of creationist misconceptions. [See it on YouTube](#)

12.45-13.15

Questions from the floor

13.15 – 14.15

Lunch

14.15 – 14.45

Lost in education: on the cognitive biases that impede our acceptance of evolutionary theory

Johan De Smedt, University of Ghent, Belgium

As Rousseau observed, successful education requires an understanding of the way humans learn about the world around them. Over the past few decades, developmental psychologists and cognitive scientists have uncovered a number of cognitive biases and learning mechanisms by way of which humans acquire an intuitive understanding of the biological world: essentialism (the belief that animals and plants possess an unchanging and hidden essence), teleology (the belief that biological phenomena have an inherent purpose), and the design stance (the conviction that complex and functional objects are products of design). These biases are not compatible with evolutionary theory, and impede both the understanding and acceptance of the theory.

14.45-15.15

“Evolutionary Humanism”: How to cope with the ‘moral’ arguments against evolution

Dr Michael Schmidt-Salomon, Giordano-Bruno Foundation, Germany

Many objections made to the theory of evolution are not scientific but moralistic. Especially in Germany, evolutionary thinkers are confronted with the reproach that their ideas would lead to a new rise of Social Darwinism. “Evolutionary Humanism” is a good concept to deal with this problem. It combines a strong naturalistic and an also strong humanistic point of view which is attractive for many people today. [See it on YouTube.](#)

15.15–15.45

Tea and Coffee

15.45-16.15

Hinduism and the Myth of Evolution

Babu Gogineni, International Humanist and Ethical Union, India

Many Hindus believe that the stories of the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu (Fish, Turtle, Half-Lion, Boar, Monkey, Half-Man/Half Lion, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna and Kalki etc.) are actually a symbolic way of explaining the theory of evolution to the common people by the great sages of ancient times. These beliefs can mean that evolution is not opposed, but of course science is not the winner here!

16.15-16.45

Questions from the floor

16.45 – 17.30

‘Humanism and Science’

Professor A C Grayling, Birkbeck College, London, England

As well as being the 150th anniversary of ‘On the Origin of Species’, 2009 is the 50th anniversary of C P Snow’s influential Rede lecture, ‘The Two Cultures’ which presented the breakdown of communication between the humanities and the sciences as an obstacle to human progress. All this and more were addressed in Professor Grayling’s lecture to close the day. [See it on YouTube](#)