

# THE PHOENIX

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## Springtime for Darwin

The wars of evolution are louder than ever. What Ben Stein, Bad Religion, and a physics professor from Quincy can tell you about where you came from.

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VIDEO: Greg Graffin receives the 2008 Award for Outstanding Lifetime Achievement in the Field of Cultural Humanism.

There are two stories, and two stories only.

In the first story, which takes place about 10,000 years ago, a beneficent Creator makes the Earth — mantles it with ozone, sets the birds a-flapping, and in the middle of it places his special project, the brainy biped known as Man. Things go along splendidly until Man, in the first recorded exercise of his famous free will, injures the Creator's trust. Thereafter all is disharmony, albeit a disharmony that is mysteriously enfolded within the total harmonious being of the Creator, to whom Man — that tragic asshole — now addresses prayers along the lines of "Where are you?" and "What's going on?"

Our second story begins in the distant eons, on the shores of nothingness, where a random spoke of electricity from a passing dust cloud has momentarily lanced a couple of slumbering proteins. Stung into life, they writhe and knot themselves into the first self-replicating molecule: existence begets itself, and begets, and keeps on begetting. Is somebody — or Somebody — watching? Nope. Colossal wastage is the law. Agony follows agony in this fatherless world, mutation grinding upon mutation, until 4.5 billion years later Richard Dawkins types the last sentence of *The God Delusion* ("Even better, we may eventually discover that there are no limits."), hits Send, and sits back in his chair.

Two accounts of our origins. Two perspectives. Two options. Perhaps you find the second no more congenial to your sense of personhood than the first. Too bad. This is America in 2008. Pick one and move along.

### Fresh Pond Mall, where worlds collide

"Ever get that feeling like you just kicked Lucifer in the face and got away with it?!" Roy F. Moore of Woburn grimaces in triumph against the broad afternoon light. "That's the feeling I get from that movie."

We're outside the Fresh Pond 10 — most desolate of Cambridge's multi-screens, wedged in the southeast corner of the Fresh Pond Mall between a boarded-up acupuncture center and the railroad track. It's one of the four places in Massachusetts where you can see the anti-Darwin documentary *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*. It was just the two of us in the theater, and having observed the affirmative nature of Mr. Moore's reactions — his gasps, guffaws, fist-shakings, and signs-of-the-cross — I introduced myself. Mr. Moore (somewhat unexpectedly) is a columnist for *Gilbert Magazine*, the official publication of the American Chesterton Society, so we talk about that roly-poly old Catholic apologist G.K. Chesterton. We talk about the Tridentine Mass, and punk rock, and Mr. Moore quotes approvingly from the Dead Kennedys' "A Child and His Lawnmower": "You know some people don't take no shit/Maybe if they did, they'd have half a brain left!" And we talk about Ben Stein.

*Expelled* is Stein's debut as a documentarian (though not as a conservative ideologue), and its central argument goes something like this: American education is in the grip of totalitarian atheists who are using the theory of evolution to vacuum God from our children's minds. In support of this argument, Stein flat-foots it Michael Moore-style around various academic institutions, bemoaning the suppression of the gentle idea known as intelligent design, or ID. He talks to professors who have questioned the Darwinian orthodoxy and been ostracized, banished to the "scientism gulag." He wheels out atheist bogeymen like Dawkins and insults them. The possibility of a loving God is juxtaposed with dead-end Darwinism, with the hoarse, tolling voice of Cornell University's Dr. William Provine: "No life after death, no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning in life, no human free will." Stein visits Darwin's house and lingers before a statue of the great man, staring balefully into its unseeing marmoreal eyes. Violins dither in the background. We learn that evolutionary biology is responsible for eugenics, abortion, and Nazism. The cosmos gapes coldly, through sprinklings of infanticide. Rationality goes *poof!* It's like listening to a Butthole Surfers album at half-speed.

If you can see *Expelled* without paying for it, I recommend that you do. It is, of course, propaganda — slickly, cunningly, even wittily

made, but with the unmistakable reek of begged questions and snuffed ideas. Hitler, for example, inasmuch as he owed anything to anyone, seems to have been quite as indebted to Martin Luther as he was to Charles Darwin. More to the point, ID has been rejected or “censored” by the scientific establishment not because it implies God, but because *it isn't science* (see below). But these are facts, mere footling facts. The goal is to strike a nerve, to enlist the viewer, at the heavy-metal level, in a battle for the soul of man. To hell with godlessness! A pox on political correctness! Is our fate no grander than, in Chesterton's words, “the blind destiny of matter”?

And the nerve is struck, over and over. Hence the after-pangs of exultation that, as we stand outside the Fresh Pond 10 at 3 in the afternoon, are still discharging themselves through the body of my new friend Mr. Moore. Ever kicked Lucifer in the *face*?

### The many moods of Greg Graffin

The scuffed chords and the wooden-hued voice of the singer rise heretically into the rafters of Harvard's Memorial Church — “What pretension! Everlasting peace! Everything must cease!” — and the congregation nods along in Cantabrigian complacency. This is Greg Graffin unplugged: the Bad Religion frontman is here at the invitation of the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard, which is giving him its 2008 Award for Outstanding Lifetime Achievement in Cultural Humanism (this past year's winner: Salman Rushdie), and between the acceptance speech and the Q&A, he's treating us to a song or two. Graffin is being celebrated for the music of Bad Religion, and for . . . wait a second. Cultural *humanism*?

“I'll give you humanism in 25 words,” says Greg Epstein, Harvard's energetic humanist chaplain. It's the week before the award ceremony, and we're in his office in the basement of Memorial Church. Organ music floats down — a touch of celestial irony regularly remarked upon, apparently, by visitors. “Humanism,” he says slowly and emphatically, “is a progressive life stance that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability, and our responsibility, to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment aspiring to the greater good of humanity.” And why give an award to Graffin? “Because Bad Religion,” says Epstein, speeding up now, “are giving people a sense of the inspirational quality of living a humanist life! Graffin is somebody who, when he writes songs, he's informed as a scholar, he's informed as an intellectual. I listen to his songs and I could take notes, and yet you have big burly guys crowd-surfing to this stuff! If he has a message about evolution, that's it — that evolution, too, is worth crowd-surfing over!”

Graffin may indeed be the only hardcore punk rocker ever to have referred to himself in a song as a humanist. Check out the one-minute-53-second didactic folk-slam “Materialist,” from 2002's *The Process of Belief*: “I'm materialist, call me a humanist/I guess I'm full of doubt/So I'll gladly have it out with you/I'm materialist/I ain't no deist!”

Need some more Graffin-applicable nouns ending in “-ist”? Try atheist, rationalist, realist, naturalist, and — most pertinent to our discussion — evolutionary biologist. When he's not on Bad Religion duty, Graffin teaches life sciences at UCLA. He did his PhD at Cornell, under Dr. William Provine — the same Dr. Provine cast so effectively as the Ghoul of Darwinism by the producers of *Expelled* (“No ultimate meaning in life, no human free will”).

Cranked out in a record-breaking three months, the title of Graffin's dissertation was *Monism, Atheism, and the Naturalist Worldview: Perspectives from Evolutionary Biology*. Its thrust was simple: God or evolution — you can't have both. Or as the Bad Religion track “Lookin' In” puts it: “There's no compromise/Our evolution is our demise.”

In person, there's little dogma to Graffin. The man I meet the day after the award ceremony, at his downtown hotel, is droll, open-handed — more of a human than a humanist — his ideas operating recognizably within the same rugged economy as the music of Bad Religion. And on the no-God thing, he's pretty hard-boiled. “There's no *need* for ultimate meaning,” he tells me patiently, “because we have enough proximate meaning to keep our lives rich. We have plenty of things in the here-and-now that can keep us focused!” So how come people are religious? “A scientist who doesn't believe in the supernatural deals with religion by saying that it came to prominence through sociobiological evolution, as a function of social groups. Now that's *highly* offensive to a religious person, who says, ‘First of all, you're saying that I have to understand evolution to understand religion. And second, you're taking away all the important things, like the afterlife, and the soul, and the incorporeal spirit — all those meaningful things.’ So there's really no common ground there.”

None at all? Is it only a matter of how politely you can tell the other person you think they're crazy? He pauses. “I do have tolerance, but if it's just social etiquette that we're talking about, well that's not that intellectually interesting to me. What is interesting is the tenets and whether or not they're compatible or not. And to me, there is no compatibilism.”

*Expelled* features an interview with Professor Steve Fuller, of Britain's Warwick University, in which it is suggested that an embrace of the Darwinian perspective might entail “a deprivileging of human life.” Can Graffin, a Darwinian to his bones, see where he's coming from? “Oh, yeah! Of course! I mean, what was Darwin's greatest achievement?” Uh . . . “What was his revolution? *He changed the worldview of human nature*. He said that no longer can we believe in the special creation of humans, because all species come from other species. So we are not privileged in that sense. Furthermore, we have to be seen as a part of nature. *That was the revolution*. In the dualist perspective, man is supernatural because he was created in the image of God and then somehow, we don't know how, inserted into nature. But now, after Darwin, we're on this big connected chain of heredity. So if you want to call that deprivileging, go right ahead. But that's just a value judgment. I see it as more of a glorification — that we're part of

this immense and wonderful process that has been going on for billions of years. I find that rather magnificent.”

Arrayed behind Darwin’s sad old pioneer’s face, the producers of *Expelled* would have us believe, are all the shrieking cavalries of nihilism. Is this what we hear in words like Graffin’s? Or is this the testimony of a man who, with Joseph Conrad, is simply “too firm in [his] consciousness of the marvelous ever to be fascinated by the mere supernatural”?



### Flood insurance

Richard Dawkins, that well-known moderate, has opined that creationists — disbelievers in evolution, that is — are “wicked, stupid, or insane.” What does Karl W. Giberson think? Giberson is professor of physics at Quincy’s Eastern Nazarene College, and his new book *Saving Darwin: How To Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* will be published in June by HarperCollins. We meet in his office, on a quiet and sunny South Shore morning. “I would describe creationists as thoughtful, not well-informed, and . . .” He vanishes briefly into his silver mustache. “Nice. They’re very nice, on the whole. Friendly, civic-minded, solid neighbors, all of that. Good people. Which is not to say that Richard Dawkins isn’t a good person. If he moved in next door to me, I’d look forward to having some very interesting discussions with him. But the majority of creationists do not want to become culture warriors. They just want to believe in God and not have some egghead from Oxford University telling them that they can’t.”

Giberson is an ex-creationist himself — part of what makes *Saving Darwin’s* account of the evolution wars so compelling is that its author has experienced them, as it were, within the formations of his own brain. Raised a fundamentalist Christian in Maritime Canada, Giberson arrived in Boston as a student in 1975, fully intending to make a career in scientific creationism. Reality, however, had other plans: mainstream science and contemporary biblical scholarship did their pincer move on Giberson’s head, and under this alien pressure he “evolved rapidly” (as he writes) “from the simple intellectual life-form called *Homo fundamentalis* to something more complex, in the process passing rapidly through the various intermediate forms that emerged in the decades since Darwin.”

Creationism, the most rustically vigorous of these intermediate forms, was kick-started in 1961 by the publication of Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb’s best-selling *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications*. Fundamentalists had been stoutly denying Darwin for more than 100 years, but until *The Genesis Flood* they had no science of their own, so to speak. Now Morris, a Southern Baptist with a PhD in hydraulic engineering, gifted them the beautiful “vapor-canopy hypothesis” (in which misty cupolas of steam shielded the Earth from radiation before condensing, at God’s command, into the downpours of the Flood) and some sensational photographs (later disowned by him) of human and dinosaur footprints *together* on a Texas riverbed.

It’s a very American thing, creationism, combining at a stroke an Old Testament mindset with a distinctive and touching faith in novelty. Think of Steve Martin in *The Jerk*, sending back the vintage bottles: “Bring us some *fresh* wine! The freshest you’ve got — this year! No more of this old stuff.” Not for the creationist the shabby, long-suffering Earth of conventional geology, the scorched and pockmarked planet with its billion-year crawl of radioactive decay; he wants a young Earth, 10,000 or 6000 years young, fossil-

free, bounced into being at the snap of God's fingers and then — at the first sign of age — hosed off with the Flood.

*The Genesis Flood* spawned creationist journals and creationist research institutes, but despite the fact that Morris, in Giberson's words, "could hardly have been more qualified to work on flood geology if he had been Noah's first mate," creationism got no respect from the scientific community. Attempts to maneuver its Biblically inspired flood geology into the classroom were laughed away. It was time for something a little less homespun: it was time for intelligent design.

ID, as defined by its leading advocate, Dr. Stephen C. Meyer of Seattle's Discovery Institute, "holds that there are telltale features of living systems and the universe that are best explained by a designing intelligence." At the heart of ID is the notion of "irreducible complexity" — the proposition that there are certain structures in nature (the structure of the cell, for instance) that are simply too marvelously intricate to have been created by natural selection. Ergo: design. Ergo: God. "Well, the intelligent-design people would challenge that," says Giberson. "They would say, 'It's not religious. We don't specify the origin of the design, we just say that there is design.' But it's a strange coincidence that basically every single person in the intelligent-design movement is a conservative evangelical."

And it's a strange God they have, too. He's a theological curiosity: an Omnipotence reduced to a state of vagrancy, riding like a boxcar bum in the spaces left untenanted by Reason. This is the problem with being an advocate of intelligent design. As a Christian, you're committed to the belief that God is active in His creation, always and everywhere. As an IDer, on the other hand, you're obliged to exile Him to its semi-explicable fringes. Bad religion, indeed. But hey, that's politics. Whatever it takes to get the Almighty into the science curriculum. "The primary difference between ID and creationism," says Giberson, "is that ID is aggressively political, even to the point where they don't want to articulate exactly what they think, because some of them think the Earth is 10,000 years old, some of them think it's 5 billion years old, and they all want to kind of pretend they're part of the same movement. But if that movement ever did get control of science in the public schools, they would have to quarrel and separate at that point, and go at each other."

Giberson, however, will not dismiss the IDers out of hand. "Scientifically, there's really been no movement in intelligent design since the 19th century," he says. "I mean, as science, it ends there. But that's not to say that it hasn't played a very positive role in highlighting certain things that I think are important to talk about. Darwinism is taught in the public schools in the same way that Newtonian mechanics is taught: as a tidy and complete theory where everything fits. But in fact Darwinism is rich with things that we don't understand, with mysteries, with things that look contradictory and so on, and if we were able to talk in a more civil way about this, it would actually be very helpful."

### Devil-ution

If you're a creationist — and polls suggest that roughly 100 million Americans are, or think they are — you just can't say "evolution" without saying "Lucifer." It was he, after all, and not his peon Darwin, who was the primary architect of evolutionary theory. "Now if Satan (or Lucifer) is going to believe that God isn't really the Creator," wrote Henry Morris, author of *The Genesis Flood*, in his 1989 book *The Long War Against God: The History and Impact of the Creation/Evolution Conflict*, "then he has to have some other explanation. That's why I have to say that Satan was the first evolutionist. Evolutionists ridicule me for saying that, but again, I can think of no better explanation for how this worldwide, age-long lie came to be, than through the father of liars, who is the devil."

But not all religious people feel that way. In fact, let's be bold and say that most religious people resoundingly don't feel that way. As Eugenie Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education, points out in *Expelled*, the "big secret" is that mainstream Protestants and Catholics are "fine with evolution." Pope Pius XII, in his 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*, allowed that, while there can be no question of the evolution of *souls* — which are "immediately created by God" — the evolution of *bodies* appears to have been proved. And Chesterton himself noted 40 years earlier that, "if evolution simply means that a positive thing called an ape turned very slowly into a positive thing called a man, then it is sting-less for the most orthodox; for a personal God might just as well do things slowly as quickly."

So what's the problem? The problem is that if you're Richard Dawkins, or William Provine, or Greg Graffin, that isn't what evolution means. Their evolution doesn't allow God some straw-hatted and green-thumbed supervision of the natural process — it goes right back to the beginning, and erases Him. Maybe, when you get to the bones of it, there is no "compatibilism" in the evolution war — any more than there is "compatibilism" between a couple of blood-darkened Ultimate Fighters prowling the Octagon. Detoxify the rhetoric? It might not be possible: in this particular argument, everyone lost their tempers 150 years ago. Moderation? The meek shall inherit the Earth, but they rarely win the debate.

Why not, instead, just let the thing blow? Let it rip. Let every voice roar. Much, everything perhaps, remains to be learned. And there's nothing to be afraid of — evolved or specially created, we're *already here*. As the waggish husband told his wife, upon being asked how she was looking in her new spandex outfit: the worst is behind you.

True pluralism, of course, is not in everybody's interest. The makers of *Expelled*, pursuing their conceit of academic censorship, found it necessary to do a little pruning of their own. Dawkins, Provine, and the biologist PZ Myers are all unhappy with the movie's rather selective portrayal of their views, and Provine nearly took legal action against producer Mark Mathis. "In the first view of me,"

Provine wrote me via e-mail, “I said ID was boring, boring, boring. That was certainly true, but I also said that ‘natural selection’ made [into] this or that is *equally* boring. Turning natural selection into a teleological agent explains nothing, same as ID . . . boring, boring, boring. In the second view, they used a soundtrack from my library interview and transposed it to my presence on the stage where I teach. That is not how I teach. They asked what I believed. I do raise all these issues in my class, but I also invite ID and creationist speakers who raise their issues for my class (non-majors in biology). Under a threat of a lawsuit, [the producers] added me at the end inviting all students to my class no matter what their beliefs are on evolution or totally rejecting evolution. I love them all.”

And you, gentle reader, what kind of an “-ist” are you? Allow me to make mention here of my own modest school — the school of *elasticism*. The principle is obvious, perhaps: the elasticist can stretch. The elasticist is not overwound. The elasticist keeps his mind tensile and tuned, in the awareness that at any moment he might be catapulted from between its ding-dong polarities and into . . . God knows what.

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