

Marks, Robert J.

From: Marks, Robert
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Students bridge science, faith at Christian colleges

But intersection of Bible, biology lab not free of collisions

By Lisa Anderson
Tribune national correspondent

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BOURBONNAIS, Ill. -- As the battle over the teaching of biological evolution buffets public high schools, a more delicate challenge faces many of the nation's Christian colleges and universities: helping students bridge the growing gap between modern science and fundamentalist faith.

With the increase in evangelical Christians and the rise in home schooling for religious reasons, Christian schools of all types find that many of their students come from a creationist tradition. "Young Earth" creationists take the Bible's Genesis account of creation literally while "old Earth" adherents believe the planet is older than 10,000 years. Both consider Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and particularly its assertion of the common ancestry of all life and the mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection to be evil, faith-threatening concepts.

Some extremely conservative colleges and universities, such as Patrick Henry College in Virginia and Bob Jones University in South Carolina, approach all studies from a strict biblical perspective. While biology classes may cover neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, creationism, often including an Earth age of less than 10,000 years, is presented as the best explanation for the development of humans and the universe.

But many, more moderate "Christ-centered" institutions have firmly distanced themselves from the less-rigorous academic stereotype of the "Bible college" and have invested in cutting-edge science programs and facilities comparable to those at highly rated secular schools.

The intersection of Bible and biology lab, however, seems more like a collision course for some students.

"Imagine telling a very devout creationist that evolution is real, but it doesn't endanger their faith," said Richard Colling, a professor of biology at Olivet Nazarene University, affiliated with the Church of the Nazarene, in Bourbonnais, south of Chicago. "That's exactly the journey many of our

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college students begin when they come into my biology class."

Toni Moran, 21, a senior biology major from Decatur, has taken that journey.

"Personally, I think there's such a divide among Christians that we're forced to choose evolution or creationism. I think so many Christians are afraid that if they even look at the scientific evidence, they'll lose their faith," she said, noting that "' evolution' is a taboo word in my church and in my home."

Moran said she has come to accept evolution as compatible with her faith but thinks intelligent design should be included in science classes. Intelligent design, or ID, presents itself as a scientific theory positing that some complex aspects of the natural world, yet unexplained by evolution, best are attributed to an unnamed and unseen intelligent designer, whom many ID proponents believe is God. Nearly universally rejected by scientists, ID is considered by many to be a high-tech name for creationism.

Colling vigorously opposes ID, calling it "a God of the gaps" concept without scientific merit that uses God to fill gaps in scientific understanding.

' God is erased'

"Intelligent design ensures that God will be pushed into an ever-diminishing corner and ultimately be viewed as obsolete. Every time science makes a new discovery, God is erased," Colling said.

"Science will undeniably advance, and if we hold onto this creationist thought, I fear that Christians will be left behind," said Suzi Supernant, 21, a senior biology major from Bourbonsais. She said she and her twin sister, Stephanie, also a biology major at Olivet Nazarene, were "radical creationists" until they got to college.

Said Stephanie, "I teach Bible studies to high school students, and I tell them, ' I'm a Christian and I believe in evolution.'" But several of the students said that Christians who support evolution are sometimes derided as being weak in faith and bound for hell.

For creationist or other very conservative Christian students, the initial exposure to modern biology and neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory can be akin to "culture shock," said Randall O'Brien, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Baylor University, a moderate Baptist General Convention of Texas school in Waco.

"For many young people, college is the first time in which their own perspective on the world is being challenged," said Ron Mahurin, vice president for professional development and research at the 105-member Council for Christian Colleges & Universities.

"If you ask me what do we teach here at Baylor, we're really as much about interrogation of faith and learning as we are about integration of faith and learning," O'Brien said. "At Baylor, we believe Jesus came to take away our sins, not our minds."

Nonetheless, he said, faculty are aware that "sometimes the word evolution is very offensive to people who come from home-schooled situations."

"My intent is to be honest and truthful and to engage all questions as a person of intellect and a person of faith and not feel that truth is some sabertooth tiger that might jump out of the woods and devour my little, anemic God," he said. "If truth leads to God, what fear do we have going after it?"

Although intelligent design is not taught at Baylor, O'Brien said, the university had a controversial association with it. In 1999, the Michael Polanyi Center opened at Baylor's Institute for Faith and

Learning, headed by William Dembski, one of the foremost ID proponents and an early fellow of the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based think tank and leading advocate for ID. After creating a furor among Baylor faculty, the center was stripped of its name and Dembski was dismissed in October 2000.

"Our scientists felt it made Baylor look like it could be stereotyped and placed in a particular fundamentalist camp that Baylor didn't want to be in," O'Brien said.

School presents varying views

That is not the case at Biola University in La Mirada, Calif., where Michael Keas, a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute, is a professor of history and philosophy of science.

"I assign reading from various points of view . . . whereas the Darwin-only approach, I frankly find boring," said Keas, who includes articles by Dembski on the reading list.

Formerly the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Biola is a conservative Christian interdenominational university that affirms the moral, spiritual and historical inerrancy of the Bible in its doctrinal statement.

A proponent of ID, Keas believes Biola's students benefit from that approach.

"I think they're getting a much more open-minded, fairer assessment of the topic than many secular university courses offer because there's almost a kind of speech code on secular campuses, that if you criticize Darwin, you must be a fundamentalist," Keas said.

Meanwhile, Colling at Olivet Nazarene is determined to find a way to bridge the gap between science and faith.

"When they recognize ID is a sinking ship, they'll want an option that keeps God in the picture," he said. He believes he may have that option in "random design," a concept he developed that gives science the freedom to pursue truth wherever it leads and people of faith the ability to see God in the very randomness of evolution.

"Random design is not directionless design. Random design is equal opportunity. It speaks of a God who is so big that he can even harness the law of randomness to create," said Colling, who laid out his case for the concept in his 2004 book "Random Designer."

"It makes a very clear statement to the student that religion and science can be fully compatible," he said. "We know it can happen because it's happening. You can be a Christian and fully embrace science."

lbanderson@tribune.com

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Robert J. Marks II, Ph.D.
Distinguished Professor of Electrical & Computer Engineering
Engineering Graduate Director
Department of Engineering
Baylor University
Waco, Texas 76798-7356
Robert_Marks@Baylor.edu

8/3/2007

<http://www.ecs.baylor.edu/faculty/marks/>
(O) 254 710 7302
(F) 254 710 3839

Mailing Address:
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97356
Waco, TX 76798-7356