

Courses promote talks on evolution and creationism

By Chris Young

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — Two hundred years after the birth of Charles Darwin, author of “The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection,” the debate continues about how we came to be.

To help people sort out their feelings and ideas about our origins, Springfield College/Benedictine University and the University of Illinois at Springfield have been offering a course on evolution and creationism.

Darwin was born on Feb. 12, 1809, the same day as Springfield’s most famous resident, Abraham Lincoln.

In his 1859 book “The Origin of Species,” Darwin outlined his theory of natural selection — forms of life evolve or adapt to changing environments in order to survive, and pass advantageous adaptations to succeeding generations. The theory runs counter to religious beliefs that God or an almighty power created the world’s life forms, and that the answer to how humans and other species got here lies within religious texts.

But rather than take a confrontational approach to the issue of science versus religion, instructors say they are trying to foster respect among people with varying opinions, hoping to get students to open up about their beliefs and think about them critically.

“I let the students go ahead and talk about their beliefs, whether they are fundamentalists, diehard atheists, Bible literalists, or people who really don’t know what is going on,” says Darlene Snyder, assistant professor of biology at SC/BU. “I tell my kids, if you run into someone who absolutely knows the truth, don’t believe a word of what they are saying.”

Snyder says she keeps her own opinions out of the class.

"After class," she says, "I'll have four or five of them come up and say, 'We don't get you. Your e-mail address is evolutionmom and you're wearing a cross. We can't figure out your point of view.'

"I tell them the class is intended to help you understand your point of view, not mine."

Snyder says she revamped the class a couple of years ago, after it had dropped off the course schedule.

The SC/BU class is a hybrid combining online, in-person and laboratory portions. This summer, the class is traveling to the Galapagos Islands near Ecuador for nine days to walk in Darwin's footsteps. The scientist traveled there in the early 1830s, and his observations of the plants and animals on the islands greatly influenced the foundation of his theory of natural selection.

Snyder said this is SC/BU's first time to organize the trip, which leaves June 3. Fifteen people are signed up. The trip is open to people who are not enrolled in the class.

"It's a chance to see what he saw," Snyder says. "Then you can understand better how he came up with this theory of evolution, which unifies all of biology."

Dennis Ruez, Jr., assistant professor of environmental studies at UIS, is in line to teach the course next school year.

He says the course is intended to help students understand why people think the way they do on the issue on evolution versus creationism.

"I hope people will get an appreciation of why other people have their own thoughts (on evolution and creationism)," he says. "Many people take the issue very personally, and have a confrontational approach. Even if you think you are right, there is no reason to have that attitude."

Ruez has been reading in preparation for teaching the course. One publication is The Quarterly Review of Biology from December 1997 that includes discussion of an address by Pope John Paul II that addresses the Catholic church's views on evolution and the spirituality of man.

"I don't know if people are aware that most religious denominations don't have an issue with evolution," he says. "It's not a science versus religion issue."

Scientific method is used to test ideas, not to make subjective judges about value, morality or faith.

“When you hold any of (the religious belief systems) up against science you can see that they don’t have anything in common,” Snyder says. “Faith and science don’t cross paths very often.”

Some people just don’t trust science, Snyder says.

“But they love their cars and their antibiotics and they love having their appendix out before it bursts,” she says.

“It’s important that people understand what religion is and what science is and how the two can complement each other,” Snyder says. “They don’t have to be mutually exclusive, despite what people preach. You don’t have to stop believing in God just because you believe in evolution.

“If your car doesn’t start, you don’t call your priest or your rabbi.”

Science avoided religious issues in the past.

“Science used to shy away from that,” she says. “Now it’s very out in the open. The thing to do is to (discuss) it with respect.”

Ruez says he doesn’t know quite what to expect when his first class convenes. The classes are fairly large, he says. About 30 students are in each class.

He says Internet searches have turned up dozens if not hundreds of different creation stories. American Indian cultures have about 100 options, he says.

“Do I have to teach all of them?” he asked a class of graduate students last semester.

Ruez says different people have sought the answers to life’s great mysteries in many different ways.

“Why do people ask these grandiose questions?” he says. “I think people find life more comfortable with a meaning behind it.”

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Darwin’s theory of natural selection

Natural selection is the survival and reproductive success of individuals best suited to their environment. Natural selection requires variation among individuals in a population and that those characteristics must be able to be passed on to succeeding generations. Natural selection leads to individuals becoming better adapted to environmental conditions.

Want to visit the Galapagos Islands?

For more information on Springfield College in Illinois' Galapagos Islands trip, e-mail Darlene Snyder at dsnyder@sci.edu.