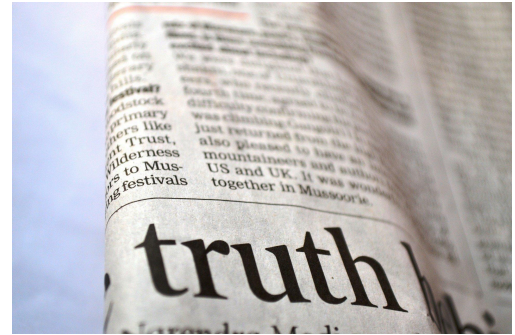




Rubio and the Age of the Earth Question

S. Joshua Swamidass

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/rubio-age-earth/>



Sen. Marco Rubio recently touched a land mine in America's culture wars: evolution, creation and the age of the Earth. When GQ magazine asked him how old the planet is, Mr. Rubio's winding response never directly answered the question. Instead, he noted his lack of scientific qualifications ("I'm not a scientist, man"), posited a need to teach the "multiple theories out there on how the universe was created," and settled into the platitude that the Earth's age is an unsolvable "mystery."

Predictably, his response made headlines. In keeping with Democratic talking points, the answer was framed as part of the Republican "war on science." His response also highlighted a divide between evangelical conservatives and the rest of the Republican Party at a time, in the aftermath of a disappointing election, when the two sides were already eyeing each other warily. Mr. Rubio's answer enabled his critics to cast one of the Republicans' fastest rising stars as an ignorant religious nut. It also provided an opportunity for those hostile to Christians to lampoon them for trusting their sacred text more than science.

For conservatives, it is tempting to write off the Rubio episode as one more example of biased media coverage and anti-Christian bigotry. But such a dismissal would be a mistake. Better to regard the controversy as an opportunity for introspection.

As a Christian and career scientist, I see the episode as an opportunity for both Republicans and evangelicals to establish a more coherent policy on evolution, creation and science, for two reasons.

First, the age of the Earth and the rejection of evolution aren't core Christian beliefs. Neither appears in the Nicene or Apostle's Creed.

Rubio and the Age-of-Earth Question

The rejection of evolution is not a core Christian belief. Better to focus on salvation, not creation.

By S. Joshua Swamidass
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Sen. Marco Rubio recently touched a land mine in America's culture wars: evolution, creation and the age of the Earth. When GQ magazine asked him how old the planet is, Mr. Rubio's winding response never directly answered the question. Instead, he noted his lack of scientific qualifications ("I'm not a scientist, man"), posited a need to teach the "multiple theories out there on how the universe was created," and settled into the platitude that the Earth's age is an unsolvable "mystery."

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Nor did Jesus teach them. Historical Christianity has not focused on how God created the universe, but on how God saves humanity through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Currently, a debate is unfolding in theological seminaries and conferences about the correct interpretation of the Bible's Genesis account of creation. Echoing thinkers like St. Augustine, C.S. Lewis, Mark Noll and Pope John Paul II, many of the conservative theologians in the debate believe that a serious reading of Genesis can be compatible with the scientific account of our origins.

Joining the dialogue are evangelicals who are also scientists—and with them comes a trend toward recognizing a "theistic" evolution: the role of God in creating us through an evolutionary process on a very old Earth.

The second reason that Republicans, including evangelicals, need to come up with a more coherent stance regarding the "age of the Earth" question—which journalists will always be happy to ask—is that there is simply no controversy in the scientific world about the age of the Earth or evolution. Evidence points to a 4.5-billion-year-old planet.

The evidence for evolution is just as strong. In the past, evolution rested on ambiguous fossil evidence, but now it rests on much clearer DNA evidence that increases exponentially every month. Fully appreciating this evidence takes a lot of time, reading and patience. And it is not appropriate to "teach the controversy" in science class because there is no ongoing debate in the scientific community comparable to the theological debate.

The evolution debate is not a scientific controversy, but a theological controversy about a non-central Christian doctrine. In terms of policy, neither evangelicals nor Republicans should expect secular schools to litigate doctrinal controversies in science classrooms. And Christians who try to push their view of creation through political coercion are misrepresenting their faith. The "good news" is how God saves us. Not how he created us. And it is through persuasion rather than force that he brings us to knowledge of Jesus.

Republicans have a clear path through the minefield of how-old-is-the-Earth gotcha questions. Let's leave science curriculums to scientists.

As for Democrats: Please ditch the "war on science" talking point. It only pushes Americans apart, into their respective corners. In the

In 2012, exactly eight years ago to the day, I went public by authoring an oped in the *Wall Street Journal* (included below). In the public square, I confessed I believed Jesus rose from the dead. In view of the Church and my creationist relatives, I also explained I saw a great deal of evidence for evolution. This is one of the few articles I've written that spoke so directly to politics, and it was a risky article to write. In the long shadow of the Scope Trial and the Dover Trial, I argued that science should be greater than politics, especially concerning questions of science education.

This oped was deeply personal. I explained what I personally believed and what I had personally seen. Sending this article for review was a difficult decision. Most people I knew, including family members, would passionately disagree with one part or another of what I wrote. Every mentor from whom I sought council advised me not to publish till I had tenure. Even though it felt very risky, I resolved to be truthful and transparent about what I had seen. In service of the common good, I chose to be honest about what I had seen.

The Wall Street Journal is among the most widely read publications in the world. This oped was far more visible than any scientific article I had written or lecture I had delivered. Once published, my inbox with responses. My scientific colleagues generally responded with curiosity about why I was a Christian. The response from Christians, however, was mixed. The *Discovery Institute* published a negative response, which they later revised. I answered questions in a post published on my lab website, a post that eventually became the first article here at Peaceful Science.

This article changed my path. For years afterwards, I would receive emails from about this oped. This was the most visible publication I had at the time, so even applicants to my university asked me questions about it during interviews. My experience navigating the oped's aftermath gave me confidence. I grew more public in other ways, eventually speaking about five times per year in Veritas Forums, and writing an article for them about the evidence for the Resurrection.

The decision to go public was fateful.

This oped was how the AAAS's *Science for Seminaries* program found me and invited me to be a science advisor to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. There, I met John Walton, another advisor to Concordia, who connected me to the conversation in other ways too. The *Science for Seminaries* program is also how I met Paul Metzger at Multnomah University, and many other scholars across the country. Eventually, in 2016, I started a blog, *Peaceful Science*, which grew into something much bigger in the end.

two-party system, both sides need to be able to freely embrace science as a cultural common ground.

It was another six years, in 2018, when I was awarded tenure and promoted to be an associate professor. I would only win my first NIH grants in 2016.

Today, I'm still not a full professor. Yet, in large part because of this oped, I now find myself in the public square.

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