



# Why I Went Public on Evolution

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<https://doi.org/10.54739/7ub8>



**E**ight years ago, in 2012, I was a new assistant professor at a secular university. In my early thirties, after nine years of graduate school, I had very few independent papers to my name. I did not have any NIH grants yet. In this inopportune moment, I decided to become public about my personal religious beliefs, and my views on origins, publishing [an oped in the \*Wall Street Journal\*](#). *Why did I go public?*

*Scientists engage the public for all sorts of reasons. [Peaceful Science includes atheists motivated by secular values](#).* There are many good reasons to serve the common good. But when it comes down to taking personal risks, very personal reasons take center stage. Why did I go public?

**M**ost of my family are creationists, of the *anti*-evolution sort. For years, I avoided conflict by staying silent about my shifting views on evolution. I was raised a young earth creationist. In a [long path through old earth creationism and Intelligent Design](#), I eventually [came to affirm evolutionary science](#). There were many reasons. [I could not find a conflict between Scripture and evolution](#), and had also seen evidence in our genomes for evolution. It really does look like humans and chimpanzees share common ancestors.

Most of my colleagues are not Christians, and I did not have tenure at the time. For years, I avoided conflict by staying silent about my personal beliefs. Everyone's advice was to be silent about my faith before tenure. Scientists, I was told, would not be fair to me if I revealed to them that I was a Christian. But I was one of *those* that really believed that Jesus rose bodily from the dead.

In the 2012 presidential cycle, I still drafted this article. My draft was good, written as a product of playful banter, almost on a dare.

At the time, I was dating Victoria, the kind and clever woman who would become my wife. A politician had clumsily tiptoed around the origins debate. In discussing this stumble, I confessed to Victoria that I was one of *those* that affirmed evolution. We tussled this back and forth, and I was tweaked. That afternoon, I sat down to write, and a couple hours later had a draft of the oped ready for others to read. "What a great way to settle this silly argument!"

I shared the draft with several mentors. Should I publish it? Playful banter quickly gave way to seriousness. Their advice was unanimous, "Wait!"

My father was the one family member I asked for advice. He was skeptical of evolution, but followed my career closely, thinking strategically about the future. He liked the article. Like everyone else, he encouraged me to wait. He was certain my scientific colleagues would not treat me fairly. Origins is an ugly quagmire. I should wait till after tenure. No, this was not the right time.

**V**ictoria, oddly enough, was the one person who gave me different advice. After she edited the article to be a softer touch, and she thought it was important to publish, now. We discussed everyone's advice, and decided together what I would do. I asked her, and myself, "*is publishing this worth losing my job?*"

I did not think I would immediately lose my job in a dramatic event. More likely, I thought, I could lose the respect of my scientific colleagues, which would make tenure less likely. In the worst case scenario, perhaps there could be a public confrontation. Perhaps in the end I would not get tenure. If publishing this article would contribute any way, I wanted to be at peace with the consequences. I wanted to know that what I was doing was worth the cost.

Victoria and I both concluded, "*Yes, this is worth risking my job.*" Why? There was a specific story that kept coming to mind, a conversation with a campus minister just a few months before. Later, [I wrote the story down in an article for \*Cultural Encounters\*](#). There was a post-doctoral trainee at Washington University in St. Louis. He was a seeker in science, but the origins debate made no sense to him,

On one hand, the campus minister reassured him that the gospel came first. He encouraged the student to focus on Jesus, and to trust Him. Evolution, as well as the age of the earth, was something Christians disagreed about and was not the foundation of our faith. Maybe this would make sense down the line, but it was a mystery now. Jesus was still worth his trust.

On the other hand, the Chinese church he was exploring with his wife argued that rejecting evolution was necessary to follow Jesus. They taught him that there was no reason to follow Jesus if he would not reject both evolution and affirm a young earth. If Genesis was not true, as this pastor interpreted it, then Jesus did not really die for his sins. He could only follow Jesus if he would also believe in six-day creation, less than ten thousand years ago.

The student went back and forth in confusion for over a year. He would talk to the campus minister, and be encouraged on his path to

follow Jesus. Then he would talk to the church's pastor, and here encounter insurmountable barriers to his belief. He tried to engage the church's arguments and to take them seriously. These arguments, however, were not convincing. His heart could not believe what his mind rejected.

After a year of effort and confusion passed, the student just gave up, returned to his work, and stopped seeking Jesus. He was nearing the end of his PhD, and the workload was sharply increasing. He needed to focus his efforts there. Our argument about evolution did not make sense to him. He found Jesus compelling, but could not trust our argument.

The campus minister was heartbroken. He described it as "the most depressing thing" he had ever witnessed in ministry. I know that the church pastor was doing the best he could. I am sure he was disappointed, too. Still, I cannot help but think of Jesus's words, "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea." (Mk 9:42).

Our arguing does not encourage trust. Our anti-evolutionism is not kind. It is cruel to insist that seekers reject evolution before they know and trust Jesus. It is wrong to ask them to trust our arguments instead of trusting Jesus.

S. Joshua Swamidass, "[Is Jesus Greater than Anti-Evolutionism?](#)" *Cultural Encounters*, 2017.

This student was lost in the Church's mess. The origins quagmire does not encourage trust.

Victoria and I, we reflected on this story. I related with the student. I, and many others, also had struggled to make sense of the origins quagmire, but we still found Jesus was good. After coming to affirm evolutionary science, I had avoided conflict by staying silent. I was silent with my family and silent with my colleagues. I knew there was a minefield in the No Man's Land between the trenches. The wisest course, obviously, was to avoid the risk, to avoid the conversation, to avoid the quagmire.

Though understandable, even wise, there was a cost to silence. The minefield did not disappear. There were still casualties of many sorts. The seeker in science, this postdoc, did not know how to navigate the No Man's Land. What could be done?

Workers were needed to clear the minefield. Navigating a minefield is risky, but at least I knew where some of the mines were laid. There was risk in the work, but I was coming to realize that silence was far more risky. For me, at least personally, silence was safe, but for the broader conversation, perhaps it was not the most safe path to take. I needed to be honest and transparent about what I had seen. In that truthfulness, perhaps I could clear the way way for others. I might take damage, but better me than the student.

Everyone was concerned about me, the untenured professor, but I was growing in concern for the student. What was I to do? Another question came into my mind, "*Would I regret being silent now?*" In fact, I would regret my silence. Victoria agreed. My decision was made. I would go public.

Of course, this decision initially just meant sending the article to a newspaper for consideration. I sent it to the *Wall Street Journal*. To just about everyone's surprise, it was quickly accepted for publication. That is not the usual outcome of submitting an article. Just a few weeks later, it hit print. So I did not have much time for second thoughts to grow. The public response and aftermath I explain [elsewhere](#), but here I want to explain what happened in my family and in my department.

My father was proud, but nervous about the repercussions. My mother was concerned about my faith. She opened a conversation to discuss, and eventually we came to understand each other. Other family members reacted in more negative ways. At a Thanksgiving meal a few years later, I was denounced as an "evangelist for evolution" by a close family member. There was a cost I paid.

My scientific colleagues were different.

As soon as the article was published, I had a meeting with the chair of my department. It is better to ask for forgiveness than permission in moments like this. Skip Virgin is a National Academy member, a brilliant and successful immunologist. He is not a Christian. I explained to him the article, and that I thought it was important to engage the public on evolution. Of course, I still had to do my scientific work, but he assured me this would not hurt my prospects at tenure, it might even help.

Most of my scientific colleagues were were curious, even supportive. Though most scientists are agnostics or atheists, I found they were not anti-religious. Even the anti-religious scientists were committed to treating me fairly. In the end, my secular colleagues were fair to me. I was awarded tenure on schedule in 2018.

There are many more stories to tell, but they are for another day. My motivations here, in becoming a [confessing scientist](#), is well summarized by the value of honesty:

By *honesty*, we mean forthrightness about what the scientific evidence is and is not telling us, including scientific findings themselves, along with their limits; we mean truthfulness about how science challenges us, and truthfulness about how it makes space for others.

*Peaceful Science, Mission and Values*

## 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  
Nov. 29, 2012 7:22 pm ET

SAVED PRINT TEXT

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

I understand this value professionally with regards to my scientific work. Even if I'm wrong on one point or another, I am committed to being forthright about what I have seen, even when it is unsettling. I am committed to be forthright in correcting the mistakes I make too.

This is why, alongside most scientists, I confess that I have seen evidence for evolution; we really do seem to share common ancestors with the great apes.

I also understand this value of honesty in personal terms. For me, forthrightness extends beyond just science, to include also why I am a Christian.

Speaking just for myself, I also confess that I follow Jesus. Whether evolution is true or false, I see evidence that God raised this man from the dead. It is through *this* act in history that God makes clear to me that He exists, is good, and wants to be know.

There are still risks in this dual confession. Most will dispute one point or the other. Serving the common good is worth this risk. This risk is worth serving the common good. I found this confession is self-reinforcing, simultaneously unsettling to and building trust with most factions of the Creation War, including those in both the religious and scientific communities.

**S**trange things came from playful banter. Almost exactly eight years ago, a year after the oped was published in *The Journal*, Victoria and I were married. In going public, we were aspiring together to honesty in service of the common good. Without regret all these years alter, this is why I went public in 2012.

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