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Darwin debate framed wrongly, author tells seminary audience

By David Winfrey

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Opponents to the theory of evolution have allowed the debate to be focused on the wrong question, according to an author and prominent critic of Darwinian evolutionary theories.

Evolution's proponents say, "It's the Bible versus science," which amounts to saying, "It's the Bible versus the facts," said Phillip Johnson, author of "Darwin on Trial" and two other books critical of Charles Darwin's theories.

Johnson, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, recently delivered three addresses at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Pitting the Bible against science assumes two things, he said: that the scientific world is governed by an impartial study of the evidence while those who follow the Bible do so regardless of the facts. According to that view, "if you're a creationist, the Bible, not nature, dictates what you believe."

By allowing the issue to be framed that way, evolution opponents are not taken seriously because scientists assume Christians will filter any information through an unyielding belief in God, which is considered outside the scientific realm.

But Johnson said that when he began to study Darwinian evolution 10 years ago, he concluded it was scientists who were subscribing to blind faith.

Scientists, he said, have become convinced of materialism, or naturalism, which says matter or nature is all there is and all answers will come from it. "A designer would be something outside science," he said.

In Darwin's day, Johnson said, fossil experts were greater critics of his theories than pastors, claiming the fossil record did not support his idea of step-by-step evolution of species.

More than 100 years later, the fossil evidence used to support evolution is "just as bad as always," but fossil experts now support evolution because it has become the dominant view through which all scientific discoveries are filtered, Johnson said.

"There's something other than impartial valuation of the evidence going on," he said, adding that a prominent biologist has written, "We cannot allow a divine foot in the door."

"What they are really convinced of is naturalism is true and therefore they have nowhere else to go and must find an explanation for why all the evidence is hidden," he said.

Johnson said his goal is to reframe the question surrounding evolution in the intellectual world.

"The question should be, 'Should we follow the evidence of our observations and evidence or should we follow materialistic philosophy regardless of the evidence?'"

By raising the question to a philosophical issue, Johnson said, he hopes to accomplish goals on both sides of the debate.

Among followers of evolution, the new question encompasses the types of issues that are addressed in the scientific community all the time, he said.

"That makes the issue one which is clearly legitimate on the mainstream academic stage," he said. "All the techniques that I use are very common in the academic world, except that they're not used against the great sacred cow."

Among Christians, this strategy can unite people who otherwise might be divided by such arguments as the interpretation of Genesis and the exact age of the earth. Johnson said he is very careful not to get into discussions about reconciling the biblical account of creation with science.

"They're premature. There's no point in comparing the Bible with a science that is not true," he said.

"A major reason why the Christians have never been able to get anywhere with this issue or with many others is they have been immersed in sectarian divisions and concerns," he said. "I love to say ... 'After we've settled the issue of the reality of the creator, we'll have a wonderful argument about the age of the earth and it'll be loads of fun.'"

Johnson said his larger goal is to help Christians re-enter the world of intellectual discussion as a fulfillment of the Great Commission to take the gospel to all people.

"If you ask why the agnostics came in and took over the universities, they're not to blame. They were given away. They moved into a vacuum," Johnson said. "Christian thinkers abandoned the intellectual territory and were more concerned with divisive issues and fighting with each other, and we've got to get over that."

Johnson noted that for about a century the theories of Darwin, Marx, Freud and materialism have influenced the world.

"These follies of human thought don't last forever. They run their course," he said adding that the theories of Marx and Freud have lost their scientific standing.

"Darwin still remains," Johnson said. "But for those who know, the foundation is extremely shaky and ready to fall as soon as the right kind of push can be made."

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Southwestern Seminary adds professor of Islamic studies

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has appointed a full professor of Islamic studies, the only program of its kind among Southern Baptist schools.

"Islam is no longer limited to the Middle East; it is in our own backyard and our pastors and laypeople are not equipped to deal with it," said Samuel Shahid, who was named a full professor of missions March 10. Shahid has taught Islamic courses as an adjunct professor at the seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, since 1988.

Administrators said his appointment will enhance the seminary's ability to help equip Christians to reach Muslims for Christ, to create an awareness of the impact of Islam in the West, to provide a better understanding of Islamic religion and cultures, and to help churches meet the needs of converted Muslims.

"Dr. Shahid is considered by many to be one of the foremost scholars on Islam," Southwestern president Ken Hemphill said.

Shahid said Christians need to understand diversity that exists in the Islamic community.

"Muslims differ," he said. "There are subsets. Some are regarded as cults of Islam. We cannot generalize and say all are terrorists. Most are people who would like to live peacefully."

Shahid said Christians need a good understanding of Islam if they want to minister effectively.

"There is no one method for evangelizing Muslims," he said. "I try to give a foundation and encourage the students to be flexible to develop their own approach," he said.

Shahid said Christians are "commanded to preach" to Muslims but not to debate or argue with them. "It is up to the people to accept or reject Christ," he said. "We can't change people. That is the Holy Spirit's responsibility."

Shahid said his interest in Islam grew from his study in the Arabic literature, culture and language. He earned a doctorate in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Chicago in 1982. Since 1988, he has been president and executive director of Good News for the Crescent World, an Arlington, Texas-based organization dedicated to reaching Muslims for Christ.

As churches become more aware of the impact of Islam in the United States, Shahid said he sees continued affirmation that he is where God wants him to be.

"There is no doubt about it. The demand from churches for education and consultation is growing as they realize Muslims are here," he said.

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-- By ABP staff

Baptist World Alliance leaders plan visit to troubled Chiapas

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- Leaders of the Baptist World Alliance have announced plans to visit Chiapas in September to meet with leaders of the Baptist churches in the troubled region in the south of Mexico.

Denton Lotz, general secretary of the McLean, Va.,-based BWA; Tony Cupit, director of study and research; and Daniel Carro, general secretary for the Union of Baptist Churches in Latin America, met March 16 in Mexico City with Mexican Baptist leaders who endorsed the proposed BWA visit.

Since 1994, peasant rebels in the Zapatista National Liberation Army have conducted an armed struggle against the Mexican government. Religious tensions between Catholics and evangelicals is one factor in strife which has resulted in deaths of hundreds of Indians and thousands of evangelicals having to flee their homes.

One of the poorest areas in Mexico, the Chiapas is a predominantly Catholic area. However, evangelicals have grown rapidly and now comprise about 40 percent of the population.

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Wake Forest divinity school selects board of visitors

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Wake Forest University has appointed 14 men and women to serve on the first board of visitors for its divinity school, scheduled to open next year.

"We are glad to have people of their caliber on the board providing key leadership as we build toward the fall 1999 opening of a divinity school that will be Christian by tradition, ecumenical in outlook and Baptist in heritage," said Bill Leonard, the school's dean.

Each member will serve a four-year term on the new board.

The new members are: Elms Allen, an oncologist in Winston-Salem; Jerry Baker, an executive search consultant in Winston-Salem; George Barrett, a retired radiologist in Charlotte; Linwood Davis, an attorney in Winston-Salem; Hugh Greene, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Baptist/St. Vincent's Health System in Jacksonville, Fla.; Suzanne McElwain, chief chaplain at the Luther Lockett Correctional Complex in Louisville, Ky.; and Danna Thornton Owens, chief executive officer and president of Kennon Family Investments and Properties in Birmingham, Ala.

Other new board members are: R.G. Puckett, editor of the Biblical Recorder in Raleigh; Ann Quattlebaum, a family therapist in Greenville, S.C.; Ann Sherer, resident bishop of the Missouri East and Missouri West Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church; Edward Turner, president of Don Richard Associates of Charlotte; Ed Vick, president of Kimley-Horn and Associates Inc. in Raleigh; Barbara Dail Whiteman of Raleigh; and Rebecca Wiggs, an attorney in Jackson, Miss.

Leonard said the school will train students from a variety of denominational backgrounds using a curriculum that blends instruction in traditional seminary subjects with courses taught by the faculty from the university's undergraduate, graduate and professional schools. The school will offer the master-of-divinity degree.

Earlier this year, the Henry R. Luce Foundation of New York awarded the school \$150,000 for developing the multidisciplinary courses required to prepare graduates for America's changing congregations.

Leonard said he expects the school to open with five faculty and 35 students, building to 135 to 150 students within three years. The school's first faculty members will be announced later this spring.

To date, Wake Forest has raised more than \$10 million in contributions or pledges toward a \$15 million goal and completed the first phase of renovations in Wingate Hall -- the site of the new school. That work is scheduled to be completed this summer.

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Persecution bill altered after GOP disagreement

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The House International Relations Committee approved a modified version of a bill designed to curb religious persecution abroad March 25 after a last-minute competing proposal threatened support for the measure.

The Freedom from Religious Persecution Act cleared the committee on a 31-5 vote with one abstention. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., and Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va.

It would establish a special officer in the State Department authorized to monitor and impose sanctions on countries which engage in religious persecution. The president could waive the sanctions after giving Congress an explanation that the bill's goals were still being promoted.

Earlier this year supporters announced changes to the measure to shore up support, including moving the office of religious persecution monitoring to the State Department; giving the president broader authority to waive sanctions as long as doing so would "advance the objectives of the act;" and narrowing the provision that bans the export of products that facilitate persecution.

Those changes were offered in a substitute amendment by the committee's chairman, Rep. Benjamin Gilman, R-N.Y., at what was supposed to be a routine markup -- a session where changes are made to a bill and it is passed out of a committee.

But the measure had to undergo further alterations after a GOP lawmaker threatened its passage by offering a competing substitute amendment, which Wolf-Specter supporters learned of less than an hour before the markup session began. The competing proposal was offered in the Senate the following day.

Rep. Kevin Brady, R-Texas, said his amendment was needed to implement tougher sanctions and to broaden the definition of religious persecution to "take action against all countries found guilty of religious persecution." Brady told Associated Baptist Press that supporters of the Wolf-Specter bill "have given away too much" in their modifications of the bill.

The Brady amendment would have allowed the president to choose the sanction[s] that would be imposed and would require the president to take action in all countries cited by the Annual Report on Religious Persecution.

He said it would "ensure that the United States takes real action while preserving the flexibility to design particular policies for particular countries."

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., said the Brady amendment was "a radical rewrite of what Mr. Wolf and all of us have been working on."

Critics of the Wolf-Specter bill -- including the U.S. State Department, the Baptist Joint Committee and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.-- say they share the bill's concern about religious persecution but oppose its "one-size-fits-all policy."

At the markup, a State Department official said the Wolf-Specter measure would give "unprecedented power to an office director, who is not directly accountable to anybody ... with the sole power to change American foreign policy."

After a nearly three-hour recess, the Gilman amendment was amended by Smith to resolve the standoff. The revised bill removes references to specific countries in the bill except Sudan, which is considered to be an egregious violator of religious freedom.

In another change, the secretary of state would be given more control over the officer monitoring religious persecution and more say in an annual report that the new office would draft.

Brady said the changes were made to get the votes of Democrats, leading Wolf-Specter supporters to need fewer GOP lawmakers to pass the Gilman amendment.

Brady withdrew his proposal after the recess before the Gilman amendment was approved.

Also, the committee approved an amendment offered by Rep. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., to exempt a unique Sudanese product from an import ban on Sudan in the bill. The product is a water-soluble gum used in the manufacturing of inks, confectionery and in pharmacy.

As originally proposed, the Wolf-Specter bill would have created a special White House officer who could impose automatic sanctions on countries engaged in religious persecution.

Some supporters say the changes water down the bill. At a gathering sponsored by the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission to announce changes to the bill, Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, said the bill, "weakened though it is in an effort to get support from the administration and Congress, ... is a defining moment for America."

Other supporters include the National Association of Evangelicals, Christian Legal Society, Christian Coalition, Family Research Council, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and Anti-Defamation League.

Before the committee's approval of the bill, a State Department official applauded the changes, but said the department still does not support the bill. "It's getting there," she said.

Since the bill covers a broad range of issues, it must be approved by the House judiciary and banking committees before it reaches the House floor for a vote.

Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla., and five other GOP senators introduced a bill identical to Brady's amendment March 26.

According to a Nickles press release, the International Religious Freedom Act "urges the creation of a special White House adviser on religious persecution; creates the post of ambassador at large for religious liberty; and creates a bipartisan commission to investigate religious persecution and make policy recommendations to Congress and the president."

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Religious groups urge high court to reverse ruling on worship access

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Thirteen religious organizations have asked the U.S. Supreme Court to invalidate a school board's policy barring the use of school facilities after hours for worship and religious instruction.

The New York City Board of Education policy permits outside groups to use school facilities for a variety of purposes, including the discussion of religious material. But it specifically prohibits "religious services or religious instruction on school premises."

The policy was challenged by the Bronx Household of Faith, an evangelical Christian church. After failing to convince school officials to allow the church to meet in a middle-school gymnasium for weekly worship services, the church filed a lawsuit claiming that the policy violates the First Amendment's speech and religion protections.

A federal district court and the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals have sided with school officials.

The appeals court described the school facility as a "limited public forum" that had been opened to outside organizations for a wide variety of civic and social uses.

Access to such forums may be limited, the court said, as long as the restrictions are "reasonable and viewpoint neutral." In this case, the court found that the school's policy was reasonable and did not discriminate on the basis of viewpoint.

The school "never has been made available for worship services to any outside group," the court said.

In their friend-of-the-court brief, the religious groups urged the nation's high court to quickly reverse the lower-court rulings. They said the appeals court ruling was inconsistent with Supreme Court interpretations of the First Amendment and suggested it should be summarily reversed -- without going through the formal oral-argument process.

The religious groups cited a 1981 decision, *Widmar vs. Vincent*, where the Supreme Court "rejected a policy essentially identical to the school district policy in this case."

In *Widmar*, the Supreme Court ruled that religious worship and discussion are forms of speech protected by the First Amendment and "rejected the argument that religious worship can be distinguished from other religious speech and discriminatorily excluded from public facilities," the religious groups argued.

If allowed to stand, the religious groups argue, the appeals court decision "will have negative repercussions for private religious expression across the country."

The brief was filed by the Christian Legal Society, the Baptist Joint Committee, the Council of Churches of the City of New York, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, Focus on the Family, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Liberty Counsel, the National Association of Evangelicals, the New York City Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Queens Federation of Churches, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America.

"This is an issue of great importance to thousands of churches who are now meeting in schools," said Brent Walker, BJC general counsel. "Once the school is opened up on weekends for other use, it should be available for worship, too."

Government is ill-equipped, Walker added, "to say 'yes' to religious talk and 'no' to religious worship. And how is it going to tell the difference?"

END