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# How did we get here?

Evolution is on the way out – more than 30% of students in the UK say they believe in creationism and intelligent design. Harriet Swain reports on a surprising new survey



Our'an is evidence: Annie Nawaz says it comes down to your beliefs and the way you've been brought up Photograph: John Lawrence

Chris Parker, a final-year English student at Hertford College, Oxford, believes God made the world. Ask him why, and he talks cogently about the gaps in evolutionary theory and how explanations involving intelligent design are unsatisfactory. But, ultimately, it is because: "As a Christian, I have believed in it for a long time and I have no reason to doubt it."

Kim Nicholas, who is studying to be a primary school teacher at the University of Hertfordshire, agrees. "I have grown up in a family that goes to church and I have become a Christian," she says. "When I

living things are due to a supernatural being such as God. This means more than 30% believe our origins have more to do with God than with Darwin – evolution theory rang true for only 56%.

Opinionpanel Research's survey of more than 1,000 students found a third of those who said they were Muslims and more than a quarter of those who said they were Christians supported creationism. Nearly a third of Christians and 10% of those with no particular religion favoured intelligent design. Women were more likely to choose spiritual explanations: less than half chose evolution, with 14% preferring creationism and 22% intelligent design.

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religion. "The impression people get is that science is about accumulating a lot of facts in your head rather than testing of evidence and fine-tuning what you find."

Scientists have recently expressed growing concern about creationism being taught alongside evolution in schools, particularly at the new academies run by the Christian Vardy Foundation. In April, a Royal Society statement opposed the misrepresentation of evolution in schools to promote particular religious beliefs.

Steve Jones, professor of genetics at University College London, who gave a public lecture on "Why evolution is right and creationism is wrong" at the time, has been talking about evolutionary biology

other cultures, particularly Muslims.

In the Opinionpanel survey, nearly 20% said they had been taught creationism as fact by their main school. Most thought it would be best to teach a range of theories, but nearly 30% of those who supported creationism felt that pupils should learn about creationism alone.

According to Linda Woodhead, professor in the sociology of religion at Lancaster University, religious studies is now the biggest growth subject in schools. She suggests that this reflects pupils' interest in philosophical and moral questions – questions that are likely to persist into their undergraduate years. "I don't think there is anywhere in the curriculum

## Inside

- 2 Jonathan Wolff  
How I failed my A-levels and lived to tell the tale
- 3 A, B, C  
The truth about grade inflation and 'dumbing down'
- 4 Anna Ford  
Cuts in courses are killing off the joy of learning
- 4 Peter Knight  
Let's celebrate our students' success without griping
- 5 Books etc  
Research says more spending would improve test scores
- 6 Francis Beckett  
Are you a loving parent or merely an ambitious one?



## Jobs index

7	Senior HE Academic
7	HE Academic
9	Senior Research
9	Research
10	Studentship
11	Courses
11	TEFL
12	Senior Education Support
12	General Education Support
13	Finance
14	Student Services
16	FE Appointments

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**C**hris Parker, a final-year English student at Hertford College, Oxford, believes God made the world. Ask him why, and he talks cogently about the gaps in evolutionary theory and how explanations involving intelligent design are unsatisfactory. But, ultimately, it is because: "As a Christian, I have believed in it for a long time and I have no reason to doubt it."

Kim Nicholas, who is studying to be a primary school teacher at the University of Hertfordshire, agrees. "I have grown up in a family that goes to church and I have become a Christian," she says. "When I look at things in the world I think it is amazing that God has created it for us. If you have faith in God you can believe he has done it, whether there is evidence or not."

Annie Nawaz, a second-year law student at Hertfordshire, distinguishes between scientific and "natural" evidence written in stone in the holy books. "As a practising Muslim, the holy Qur'an – that's our proper evidence," she says. It does bother her when this conflicts with other kinds of evidence, but "it just comes down to the way you have been brought up and your beliefs and values and how strong they are".

Such views are less unusual among UK students than you might think. In a survey last month, more than 12% questioned preferred creationism – the idea God created us within the past 10,000 years – to any other explanation of how we got here. Another 19% favoured the theory of intelligent design – that some features of

living things are due to a supernatural being such as God. This means more than 30% believe our origins have more to do with God than with Darwin – evolution theory rang true for only 56%.

Opinionpanel Research's survey of more than 1,000 students found a third of those who said they were Muslims and more than a quarter of those who said they were Christians supported creationism. Nearly a third of Christians and 10% of those with no particular religion favoured intelligent design. Women were more likely to choose spiritual explanations: less than half chose evolution, with 14% preferring creationism and 22% intelligent design.

While three years of learning how to weigh evidence appears to make students slightly more inclined towards evolution, with 57% of third-years choosing it compared with 54% of first-years, it does not appear to put them off belief in God. As many third-years as first-years believed in creationism, although slightly fewer supported intelligent design.

The findings come as little surprise to Roger Downie, professor of zoological education at Glasgow University. Two years ago he surveyed the views on evolution of biology and medical students there. "What was extremely worrying for students embarking on evidence- and science-based disciplines was that they were perfectly prepared to say they had rejected it not on the basis of evidence but on the basis of their religious beliefs," he says.

He says schools and universities need to be clearer about how science differs from other evidence, such as that provided by

religion. "The impression people get is that science is about accumulating a lot of facts in your head rather than testing of evidence and fine-tuning what you find."

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Steve Jones, professor of genetics at University College London, who gave a public lecture on "Why evolution is right and creationism is wrong" at the time, has been talking about evolutionary biology in schools for 20 years. For the first 10 of those he was lucky to find one student in 1,000 expressing creationist beliefs. "Now in any school I go to I meet a student who says they are a creationist or delude themselves that they are."

He blames the influence of Christian fundamentalists in America and political correctness among teachers here who, he says, feel they have to give a reasonable hearing to beliefs held by people from

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According to Linda Woodhead, professor in the sociology of religion at Lancaster University, religious studies is now the biggest growth subject in schools. She suggests that this reflects pupils' interest in philosophical and moral questions – questions that are likely to persist into their undergraduate years. "I don't think there is anywhere in the curriculum where most university students get these sorts of questions addressed," she says.

Some universities are beginning to recognise this. Jeremy Rayner, professor of zoology at Leeds University, which is to incorporate lectures on creationism and intelligent design into its second-year course for zoology and genetics next year, says the idea is to teach students about the creationism hypothesis "so they are in a position to make their own rational judgment and counter it".

While he has seen no evidence that students are more inclined to believe in creationism, he perceives a growing willingness within the creation movement to be prepared to cause disruption by promoting its views. "The best thing we can do," he says, "is what universities should be doing anyway – producing bright, intelligent young minds with the confidence to be advocates for science."