
“Thousands ... Not Billions”

Professional Creationists and Their Opponents in the United States

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Introduction

In the United States, “creationism” is an umbrella term that denotes a variety of religiously motivated rejections of the theory of evolution, and the attempts to replace that theory with more “acceptable” alternatives. These creationist thought systems are termed “Young Earth Creationism”, “Old Earth Creationism” (the latter with a variety of subsets), or – more controversially, since its proponents deny that they are creationists – “Intelligent Design”. All of these “creationisms” are being developed and disseminated by a fairly small number of professional organizations that operate nationwide in the United States. Yet their output does not encompass all relevant positions in the creation/evolution controversy. “Theistic Evolution” represents a way of accommodating Christian theology and scientific findings that is produced in a professional manner as well. Opponents of creationism develop and disseminate positions in an equally specialized manner. Some of these anti-creationists argue in favor of a social disentanglement of science and religion that is based on the conviction that both deal with “non-overlapping magisteria” (see Gould 1997). Hence, they generally refrain from associating their views on science with any religious or nonreligious worldview. Others combine their anti-creationist reasoning with an explicitly anti-religious overtone, and present science as a legitimate critique and even functional replacement of religious truth claims (cf. Dawkins 2006, Dennett 2006; for a summary of the entire spectrum of creationist and anti-creationist positions see Scott 2000).

Against this multifarious institutional backdrop, this paper seeks to address the following basic questions: Why is there creationism as a set of more or less distinct, consistent systems of thought? And why is it that the forms of creationism that exist do exist, and others do not? What roles are played by the professional creationist organizations in creating, systematizing, and distributing creationist knowledge, thus shaping public debates about it? In order to answer these questions, special attention needs to be paid to professional anti-creationists: Since their inception in the 1980s, their task is to refute the creationist thought systems, and to fight creationist influence on the public and in public schools and universities on multiple levels. The main point of this paper, then, is to show that, to a large

extent, the way in which professional creationists and anti-creationists interact shapes creationism in the United States.

In order to map out the extent to which this professional interplay determines the state of the creation/evolution debates, I shall proceed in three steps. First, I will present an example that characterizes the way in which professional creationism works in the United States. Second, I will review some key aspects of the history of professional creationism and anti-creationism in America. Third, I will present a sociological model that helps explain why creationism in the United States has developed in the way it has. This model is based upon the theory of social fields as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1991, 1992, Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992, Kaden 2015). Its main function is to make visible the way in which professional creationists and anti-creationists are attuned to each other with regard to their arguments, strategies, and the concepts they apply to interpret their own actions and those of their opponents.

1. Professional Creationists in the USA: A Case Study

An example of how the creationists work and how they attempt to transfer their professional knowledge to ordinary Christians will help to establish a focus on the importance and character of professional creationist action. The headquarters of Answers in Genesis, the largest creationist organization in the United States according to its annual revenue (see <http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=search.summary&orgid=5214,17.12.2015>), is located in rural northern Kentucky. On its premises the Creation Museum presents the creationist account of creation and world history in the form of a theme park (Kelly and Hoerl 2012). The Creation Museum also contains a petting zoo where, among other animals, a zonkey can be found, which is a breed of zebra and donkey (see fig. 1). Any attempt to explain why this animal is there not only takes a fair amount of theological and hermeneutical knowledge, but needs to take into consideration the opponents of the creationists, or more specifically, what image the creationists have of their opponents.

Answers in Genesis subscribe to a version of creationism called *Young Earth Creationism* (see [https://answersingenesis.org/about/faith/\[17.12.2015\]](https://answersingenesis.org/about/faith/[17.12.2015]), Whitcomb/Morris 1961, DeYoung 2005; McKeever/Ham 2008). The members of the organization deem the Bible to be literally true. This means that each verse is to be taken at face value unless it is clear that it contains a parable. This is why, for instance, Answers in Genesis determines the age of the earth by adding up the numbers in the genealogies of the Old Testament. Since it can be read in Genesis (5: 3–6) that Adam was 130 years old when he fathered Seth, and that Seth was 105 years old when he fathered Enos, it can be concluded that 235 years had passed between Seth's and Enos's birth. It is possible to continue with this method until the Baby-

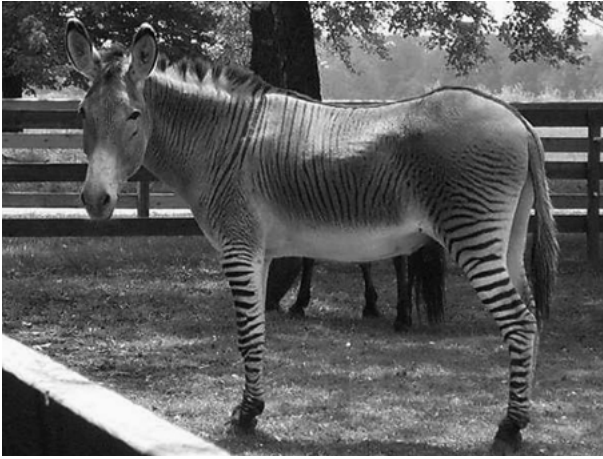


Fig. 1: A zonkey

http://guardianlv.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/111068_story__Zonkey1.jpg

lonian Exile of the Jews which can be dated to the 6th century BCE. According to this method, Adam lived about 6000 years ago, and the earth and in fact the entire universe had been created shortly before that. About 4400 years ago the Genesis Flood annihilated all land animals except the two representatives of each species that Noah and his family took on board the Ark (see Answers in Genesis' website presentation about the Ark at <https://answersingenesis.org/noahs-ark/> [17.12.2015]).

From the vantage point of creationist biology, the Ark is a bottleneck for the development of all fauna. All species of land animals in existence today must have originated from one of the pairs on board the Ark. Answers in Genesis aims to make plausible that our knowledge of our world can be reconciled with the Biblical records. Hence, the organization must show how in the course of several thousand years all kinds of species could have developed out of the few animals that Noah took on board. The zonkey plays a small part in making plausible the creationist account of natural history. It apparently proves that in just one generation a peculiar new animal can be created, and it also shows the extent of variation that exists in species. So the zonkey really is not just an attraction for kids but a subtle argument in favor of a very specific theology. (Though it might, of course, be added that from a secular biological view it is only a superficial argument since the zonkey, like most hybrids, is sterile [for scientific criticism of Young Earth Creationism see for instance Petto/Godfrey 2007]).

Both the existence of a professional creationist milieu and its orientation toward its secular, anti-creationist opponents become clear from this example. According to polls a majority of the American population is in favour of at least teaching evolution alongside creationism and/or Intelligent

Design (Berkman/Plutzer 2010: 35; for recent criticism of social scientific assessments of the spread of creationist convictions see Hill 2014), but it is developed and represented only by a very small group of professionals. Answers in Genesis is part of that group, and it is not content with just affirming the veracity of the Bible, but it also tries via a range of more or less thought-through arguments to bridge the perceived gap between modern scientific knowledge and the Bible, and to present it in a popular way so as to increase its acceptance among Christians.

As already mentioned, the zonkey serves to show that creationism cannot be understood without also taking into consideration its opponents. Generally speaking, the reasoning behind presenting the zonkey as an argument in favor of the plausibility of the literal interpretation of Genesis only comes about in response to the development of competing theories of how biological complexity arises. This situation first rose with the development and acceptance of the theory of evolution by natural selection and the theories of geology that preceded it (see Numbers 2006). In a more narrow sense, the animal is being used as a counterargument to secular scoffers who proclaim that the story of the Genesis Flood is absurd, not least because the Ark could never have carried representatives of all the species of land animals that roam the earth today. The zonkey is an animal that looks fairly new, and it appears within just one generation. This is why it is supposed to lend credibility to the creationist claim in the face of criticism. The professional creationists in the US are in many respects geared towards the views of anti-creationists, who in part are organized in a similarly professional manner as the creationists themselves.

1.1. Key Developments in the History of 20th and 21st Century US Creationism

The way in which this professional interplay came about can be elucidated by a review of some key developments in the history of modern professional creationism and anti-creationism in the United States since the late 1950s (Numbers 2006, McCalla 2006). Some conservative Christians had criticized the theory of evolution and of an old earth since the inception of those theories, and sought a quasi-scientific justification for their own views at least since George McCready Price's *The New Geology* (McCready Price 1923). There were professional creationist organizations before the late 1950s, but they were rather unstable due to doctrinal quarrels, and thus largely busy with themselves (Numbers 2006: 120–160). This will serve to show how deeply both are intertwined. In the course of the 1950s, some American evangelicals started to become more liberal in theological matters (cf. Ramm 1954). A conservative opposition formed against this, and one of the most prominent results of that opposition was a book that would later serve as the rallying point for modern creationists, namely, *The Genesis Flood* by John Whitcomb and Henry Morris (Whitcomb/Morris 1961).

A few years later Morris founded the Institute for Creation Research, which for the next decades was the most important creationist organization in the US (see Numbers 2006: 312–320; Scott 2005: 102).

For quite a few years this research institute did not actually conduct any creationist research, but was limited to some field trips to Mount Ararat, because that's where the Ark is supposed to have docked (Gen 8: 4; Morris 1973; Morris/LaHaye 1976). Yet despite the lack of research, the *Institute for Creation Research* gained considerable influence on the public school system in the United States in the 1970s. This influence peaked when the state legislatures of Louisiana and Arkansas instituted so-called balanced treatment laws in the early 1980s that compelled all biology teachers in those states to give equal time to what was then termed creation science and evolution science (Numbers 2006: 268–285). Creation Science or Scientific Creationism itself was developed by the Institute for Creation Research, and basically consisted of the arguments in *The Genesis Flood* minus the Biblical references (see Morris 1974). The main argument in favor of Scientific Creationism was one of intellectual fairness: If the evolutionary atheists had their say in the schools, then the Christian alternative should also be allowed.

During that time, opposition against the creationist advances formed throughout the United States. Concerned parents and teachers created so-called Committees of Correspondence in several states through which they exchanged arguments and strategic advice (Park 2000). In 1986 these networks were united under the leadership of the *National Center for Science Education* (NCSE) located in Oakland, which is today the leading anti-creationist organization (Park 1997). Yet when the NCSE was formed, Scientific Creationism was already in decline. In 1981 the Louisiana Supreme Court had annulled the balanced treatment law, and in 1987 the United States Supreme Court ruled that the parallel Arkansas law was, indeed, unconstitutional (see <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/482/578> [18.12.2015]). For now, the creationist threat seemed to be contained. One member of the *National Center for Science Education*, the philosopher Michael Ruse, testified in the 1981 court hearings against the scientific status of Creation Science, and this testimony contributed to the final decision against creationism (http://www.antievolution.org/projects/mclean/new_site/pf_trans/mva_tt_p_ruse.html [18.12.2015]). In this instance, the fundamental influence of anti-creationism on the fate of their creationist opponents can already be seen.

In reaction to the failure of Creation Science, creationism split into two variants, which today are predominant in the media and the educational system. The first variant can be called overt or Biblical creationism, the second might be called clandestine creationism or Intelligent Design. Overt creationism is represented today by the already mentioned organization Answers in Genesis. Its founder Ken Ham had worked for the Institute for Creation Research before he established his own ministry in 1994. Ham

has been very successful in his work, although it is harder for Answers in Genesis to gain legal access to the public school system because of the first amendment to the United States constitution, which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. Yet it is not impossible, or even particularly hard, for the positions of Answers in Genesis to still enter public schools, despite being legally prohibited from doing so. The organization provides a number of informal opposition materials and techniques. For instance, Answers in Genesis produces a book called *Evolution Exposed* (Patterson 2006) that features page by page criticism of the most widely used secular biology textbooks. Students are supposed to bring it to school and confront their teachers with creationist arguments on the spot: “This book is intended to be a reference that students can take into the classroom. [...] Students are encouraged to read the full articles, using the provided URLs, before using the information to challenge the [secular biology] textbook’s claims” (Patterson 2006: 7).

The second clandestine form of creationism that developed in the course of the demise of Scientific Creationism is called Intelligent Design (Numbers 2006: 373–398, Comfort 2007). Here the argument is not so much about the Bible and how modern scientific findings can be reconciled with its creation account. Rather, proponents of ID are looking for instances where an intelligent agent must have intervened in an otherwise natural process like evolution in order to create complex forms that cannot be explained otherwise (Behe 2006, Meyer 2009). This argument goes by the title *irreducible complexity*. Until the early 2000s, Intelligent Design represented a form of creationism that combined popular appeal with serious political ambitions.

For the purpose of fleshing out the interconnectedness of professional creationism and anti-creationism in the United States, it is important to note that Intelligent Design is the result of a strategic decision of proponents of Creation Science. Some of them were in the process of writing a biology textbook that might have been used in the states that adopted the balanced-treatment-laws when the 1987 Supreme Court Decision thwarted their plans. The book has been published in 1993 under the title *Of Pandas and People*, and is now available in its third edition (Davis/Kenyon 1993). In the second 1987 draft, there can be found an editing error that encapsulates the strategic process of transition that American creationism underwent as a result of the successful action of professional anti-creationists: The authors attempted to expunge all references in the book that could be interpreted as religious; thus phrases like “intelligent Creator” were changed to the supposedly less religious “intelligent designer”. At one point in the editing process, a phrase (“creationists”) accidentally was not deleted completely, but the alternative (“design proponents”) was still copied into the text. The resulting “cdesign proponentsists” might be termed the “missing link” of American creationism (see fig. 2).

The basic metabolic pathways (reaction chains) of nearly all organisms are the same. Is this because of descent from a common ancestor, or because only these pathways (and their variations) can sustain life? Evolutionists think the former is correct, cdesign proponentsists accept the latter view. Design proponents

Fig. 2: Cdesign proponentsists *Of Pandas and People*, 2nd draft (1987), p. 3–40
<http://ncse.com/creationism/legal/cdesign-proponentsists> (18.12.2015)

This link was discovered by Barbara Forrest, a member of the *National Center for Science Education*, and served as an argument in an amicus brief to a Pennsylvania court (see <http://ncse.com/creationism/legal/forrests-testimony-creationism-id>; Matzke 2009). The judge ruled in 2004 that Intelligent Design was indeed based upon a particular religious view and, therefore, could not be taught in biology classes in Pennsylvania. He referred to the NCSE’s findings in his ruling (http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/dover/kitzmiller_v_dover_decision.html [18.12.2015]). This is another instance of professional anti-creationism shaping the fate of creationism. In this case it led to the legal rejection of the most clandestine form of creationism to date.

1.2. A Sociological Model of the Creationist Scene

A sociological model can guide our understanding of the dynamics that shape the controversy surrounding creationism in the United States. It has become clear that the way in which the small number of professional creationist and anti-creationist organizations act toward one another has considerable influence over what counts as creationism, and over what chances of success the creationists have. What rules do the actors follow when making their moves in this game, and in what way does the game shape the way the actors view themselves and their opponents?

In order to answer this, one must first deal with a more fundamental question, and that is, what is the game about? What is it that the organizations are after in their struggle? One way to see their interconnectedness is by saying that they all try to answer the same question in a different way, and to find means to assert their respective answers in society. This question, or reference problem, of creationists and anti-creationists alike is: *What part has God, and what part has nature in the emergence and development of the world?* This allows for a formal definition of creationism: *Creationism is every representation of an answer to the reference problem that encompasses a relatively low proportion of nature, and a relatively high proportion of God.* This definition has two advantages: First, it allows for a relativistic view of the creationist scene in the United States, and for an easy assessment of new actors like the Intelligent Design movement. Second, it omits the no-

tions of science and religion as parts of the definition of creationism. This is useful because these notions are being used by the actors themselves in their struggle. To show that any form of creationism is “not science” is an effective way for anti-creationists to combat their opponents (see Pennock/Ruse 2009). People who are accused of presenting not-science as science, like the proponents of Intelligent Design, react to those accusations either by contesting that claim or the underlying notion of science (Frankowski 2008, Woodward 2003). Conversely, overt creationists emphasize that to accept the theory of evolution takes as much faith as their religious beliefs and, hence, is not science but religion (see for instance Creation Today Ministry 2012). It constitutes an additional and unnecessary burden to social scientific analysis to try to use in an analytical manner the normative terms “science” and “religion”, which are so widely used by the objects of study, and whose use, indeed, is part of the object of study.

In order to facilitate social scientific analysis of the interconnected action of creationists and anti-creationists, it is possible to imagine their game about enforcing the right answer to the same question as a playing field (see fig. 3).

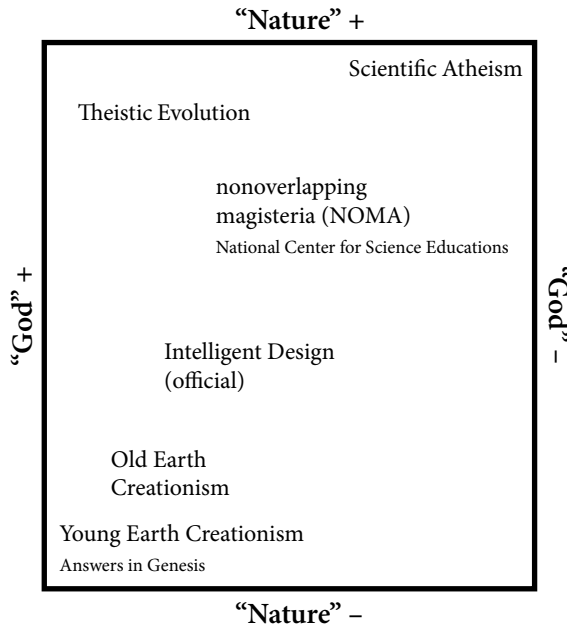


Fig. 3: The creationist/anti-creationist playing field (selection).

In the lower left corner there are all actors whose answer to the reference problem includes a high proportion of God and a low proportion of nature; Answers in Genesis is the foremost representative of this view in the United States. For the organization there were no autonomous natural processes that brought about the world as we know it, but only God’s will

and sovereign creative activity. Conversely, in the upper right corner there are actors who take the opposite view. The so-called New Atheists and other authors (Dawkins 2006, Dennett 2006, Coyne 2015, Stenger 2007), who can be regarded as important players in the controversy surrounding creationism in the United States, take the view that there are *only* natural processes. Not only is there no God, the very notion of God and religious belief in general can be explained scientifically and, thereby, reduced to natural processes via disciplines like evolutionary psychology (Boyer 2001, Dawkins 1976, 2006). In the center of the field can be found a variety of “intermediate” positions. Among them is Intelligent Design, since its proponents hold that many features of the world that, according to Young Earth Creationists, came about by God’s divine action, are the result of natural processes (see Dembski 2009). On the other hand, the world is, in their view, not entirely of natural origin, since an intelligent source must have intervened from time to time. This view decreases the overall power of nature in explaining the world, thus positioning Intelligent Design somewhere “between” the Young Earth Creationists and the New or Scientific Atheists. Another “intermediate” view is that of the National Center for Science Education, that God and nature explain different parts of the world. Stephen Jay Gould coined the phrase Nonoverlapping Magisteria or NOMA for this view (Gould 1997, 1999), which of course is not a valid empirical description of the way science and religion, as a social phenomenon, relate to each other. But it proved to be a good rallying point for those opponents of creationism who do not like to subscribe to an antireligious stance. So NOMA, above all, is a stratagem of professionals who try to position themselves in an environment of other professional actors that are opposed to them. Just like Scientific Creationism, NOMA exists only to work in the particular strategic environment that has been created by prior actions of creationists and anti-creationists.

While the positions described thus far could be graphically described using a line like the creation-evolution continuum (Scott 2000), this model goes beyond a dichotomous and exclusivist logic, and also includes views that in one way or another combine or identify science and religion. These views can be found in the upper left corner of the field, where both God and nature account for the world. In the American discourse on creation and evolution, views that adopt this perspective are termed Theistic Evolution or Evolutionary Creationism (see e. g. Peters/Hewlett 2003).

There are two main benefits to this model. On the one hand, it is clear that the notions of “God and “nature” are sufficiently removed from “science” and “religion” or “creationism” and, hence, are part of an analytic language that avoids being drawn into the debates. In most instances, it is possible to place actors in the field immediately, but especially in case of proponents of Intelligent Design who deny that the designer is or must be identical with God, this requires additional investigation. In part, this process can be part of the analysis, since it is performed by the actors

themselves: The status of Intelligent Design as “religious” and/or “scientific” is still a matter of constant struggle of the professional creationist and anti-creationist actors in the United States. Since the decision in *Kitzmiller v. Dover* (2004) the pendulum seems to have swung in favor of the opponents of Intelligent Design, but the point is that no social scientific analysis can be sufficiently distanced from this struggle which, consciously or not, subscribes to a position that is held among the quarreling parties themselves. What is possible, though, is to construct Intelligent Design as an explanatory framework of “certain features of the universe and of living things [that] are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection” (see <http://www.intelligentdesign.org/whatisid.php> [18.12.2015]) that regards naturalistic and non-naturalistic explanatory factors. This framework can then be compared to frameworks or positions of other actors who are also interested in gaining a hegemonic position for their views. All this functions without ascribing scientific or religious characteristics to those positions, which makes it possible to also look at the state of definition of a position that has been reached by the cumulative action of such actors, who have the power to determine these aspects, such as courts. This already touches upon the second benefit of the proposed model of the creation/evolution controversy in the United States: it can be used to show how the actions of the organizations can be explained with recourse to the actions of other players in the same field. In the words of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1992), the controversy surrounding creationism in the US can be regarded as a semi-autonomous field. All kinds of statements, strategies, and arguments can, at least in part, be explained with recourse to their relational character in this manner. This enables a kind of understanding of the American creationist scene that is not provided by a purely historical approach.

This can be shown via the following example of how the field model works as an interpretive tool. Occasionally creationists and anti-creationists produce images that they use to illustrate the order of the conflict in which they see themselves. These order constructs can be explained with regard to the actors’ respective position in the field. In fig. 4 it can be seen how Answers in Genesis envisages the game.

Two castles dominate the image, one representing “humanism”, which is creationist shorthand for the entirety of the secular society, the other labeled “Christianity”. Both castles rest on foundations, and the Christian fundament, the word of God, is being attacked by the secular culture. Moreover, even Christians themselves attack their own fundament via liberal theology that denies the literal meaning of Genesis, and sees it only as a symbolic or mythopoetic text. Some Christians are busy dealing with the consequences of humanism, like abortion, while missing what the conflict is actually about. Speaking more generally, there is a strong dualism that seems to be structured around a rift between secular humanists and Christians. But in fact, the rift is between those Christians who care for the cre-

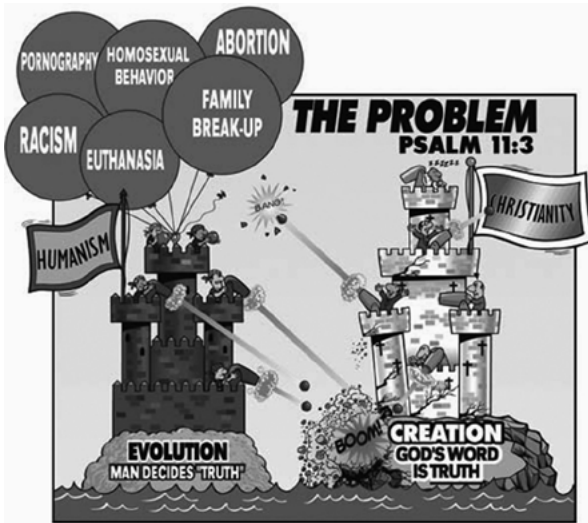


Fig. 4: “The Problem”: Order Construct of Answers in Genesis.
<https://cdn-assets.answersingenesis.org/img/articles/nab2/the-problem.jpg>

ationist fundament of their teachings, and all other people, including other Christians. The condition of possibility for such a dualistic order construction can be made visible with reference to the playing field. It lies in the fact that Answers in Genesis is located in a corner of the field. All other actors, even other creationists, take positions that ascribe a bigger role to nature when it comes to explaining the world. This shared feature makes it possible for Answers in Genesis to identify a dualist structure in the conflict.

Just how hard it is for an actor to devise a graphic representation of the order from the vantage point of an intermediary position can be seen in fig. 5 that shows how the National Center for Science Education views the order of the conflict that was already referred to at the beginning of this paper.

As already mentioned, the organization is in the center of the field. Its view is that while nature explains the physical part of the world, religion has its own realm of explanation in the world of values and “why” questions. This position sets the NCSE apart from both creationists and those antireligious anti-creationists like Jerry Coyne, who do not postulate an independent religious realm of explanation. The condition of possibility for the NCSE to describe the conflict in a dualistic manner is, hence, not fulfilled. This is why no dualism can be found in this graphic; instead we see a continuum. This is a depiction of complexity that matches the relatively complex relation of the NCSE to the other actors. The line of the continuum runs approximately diagonally through the field.

Both the castle image and the continuum are the result of views of the actors from their respective positions in the field. Hence, the field concept

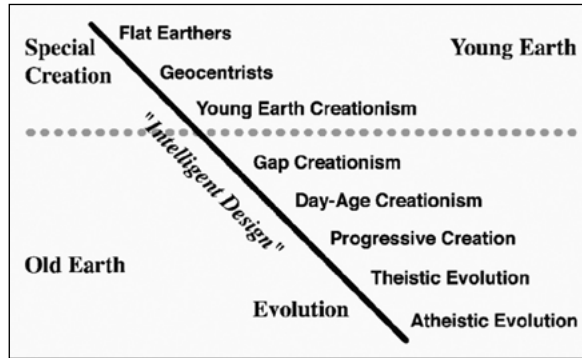


Fig. 5: "The Creation/Evolution Continuum": The National Center for Science Education's Order Construct. <http://ncse.com/files/images/continuum.preview.gif>

makes visible the basis of their views toward one another. This basis is not outside the field but within. In this sense, American creationism is a phenomenon that follows its own logic, and consequently creates its own order.

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