

Religious audiences and the topic of evolution: Lessons from the classroom – Response to presentation Rev. Betty W. Holley, Ph.D.

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on April 30, 2017

Rev. Betty Holley: 00:19

I am Betty Holley, ordained clergy, presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. I'm also a professor of environment ethics at Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio. I truly thank you, Dr. Jensen, for your research and presentation. Having taught in the natural sciences for several years on the secondary level, I had always had a suspicion that the reason why more students of my ethnicity did not pursue majors in the sciences was due to their doctrinal beliefs. After reading your work, Dr. Jensen, my suspicions became even more pronounced. Recently, I had the opportunity to gather some information from a study that was done by some well known pollsters, Peter Hart and Bill McInturff, that proved my suspicions were well-founded. They did a study of 800 adults nationwide and asked several questions, but I just want to highlight two questions. (01:20) One of the questions was, which do you think is more likely to actually be the explanation for the origin of human life on earth, evolution or biblical account of creation? 33% of the general population said evolution and 57% said biblical account. The other question was, how many days did it take God to create the earth, create the world? 44% of the general population believe it took six days. The response percentages from African-Americans for the same two questions, 16% attributed the explanation of the origin of human life on earth to evolution, and 80% attributed our human origin to the biblical account. When you ask about how many days did it takes God to create the world, 61% responded that it took six days. (02:14) Now, the reason for the responses from the African-Americans involved in this study may be the fact that the majority of African-Americans belong to Protestant denominations that are fundamentalists. The National Baptist Convention, for example, claims that every bit of the Bible is factually true. The National Baptist Convention has not invested a great deal of energy in the evolution creation debate. This may be in part because the National Baptist Convention has

always been more concerned with issues of social justice. Because of the fundamentalism of the National Baptist Convention, it is more difficult to attract talented African-American students into careers in, especially those disciplines in science that may contradict fundamental doctrinal beliefs, such as archeology, anthropology, human genetics, or evolutionary biology. (03:11) There have been several studies that have demonstrated a negative relationship between students' religiosity and the likelihood to choose a career in science. Now, let me be clear and say these are suggestive studies and more studies need to be conducted. None of them have really examined enough students to establish a different impact of African-American religiosity, particularly fundamentalism on the choice of specific science careers. For example, at North Carolina NC State University in Greensboro, where I used to be an adjunct professor, they produce substantial numbers of African-American engineers, but virtually none who pursue degrees in biology with emphasis on evolution. (03:56) Clearly, there is a need for additional studies with substantial sample sizes and conducted in a variety of academic settings to evaluate the influence of creationist ideology with regard to science careers. As a clergy person, a professor having taught on a secondary and university level in the natural sciences now teaching in the seminary, if churches want our young people to flourish in their callings and to have a positive impact on the culture, equipping them with tools they need to relate to their faiths and the science, church leaders need to be intentional about it. In light of this research, although inconclusive, there is a clear indicator that students need to have an in-depth understanding of the evolutionary theory as early as middle school, to help them truly engage in their understanding that faith and science can be compatible, which will hopefully enable them to have the desire to pursue careers in science particularly related to evolutionary biology. (04:58) Thank you.

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