

Reconciling Evolution & Religion

A Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Perspective

Instructor Guide

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Background Information

Learning Outcomes

1. Begin (or continue) a lifelong journey of reconciling evolution and religion.
2. Identify common concerns/challenges the theory of evolution poses to religion.
3. Acknowledge the different viewpoints people have regarding evolution and religion.
4. Explain the position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on evolution.

Type of Course

This module is designed to be used in both major and non-major introductory biology courses. It could be adapted to other courses, whether in sciences or humanities.

Suggested Location in the Curriculum

At the beginning of the evolution unit for each course.

Estimated Time

The bulk of this module can be handled within one 50-minute class period. However, throughout the evolution unit, the instructor will have opportunities to preview/review/discuss concepts and ideas related to reconciliation in shorter segments. The instructor may also choose revisit this toward the end of the unit if needed/desired.

Advanced Preparation for Instructor

The instructor needs to know the history of the Church's statements on evolution and be able to articulate the Church's positions. She/he will need to review all of the responses to the short writing assignment prior to class to understand the diversity of perspectives and ideas the students have in order to prepare for the class discussion.

Supplies Needed

Survey should be administered electronically.

Other resources/readings posted to the course page.

Any tools/instruments/technology needed for small groups.

Cultural Barriers to be Considered

1. Many cultural barriers for students who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stem from a particular reading of Genesis. For example:
 - Belief in microevolution, but not macroevolution.
 - Animals may evolve, but not humans.

- There was no death before the Fall.
 - The Earth is roughly 6,000 years old.
 - All the animal life on the Earth today are species that survived Noah's Flood.
2. Not everyone will question authority or think critically about statements issued by authorities (religious and scholarly).
 3. Resistance to deep scholarship stemming from 2 Nephi 9:28-29, but recent Church leaders have expressed a desire for members to receive all the education they can (Doctrine & Covenants 130:18-19).

Establishing Respect in the Classroom

One way to establish respect in the classroom is for the instructor to share his/her personal experience of studying science and being a disciple of Christ. Doing so will help students see their instructor in a new light and develop a trusting relationship. The instructor should acknowledge that there will be class discussion of sensitive/controversial issues and everyone should respect one another's expressed views and opinions (consistent with our core values).

Outline of Reconciliation Activities

Pre-Class Assignment(s)

In order to prepare the students for the class discussion, students will be asked to write a short paper about their impressions and understanding of evolution along with a discussion about their feelings towards it and where they developed these ideas. This will allow the professor to gauge the range of ideas and opinions in the class. This assignment should be given to the students early enough to allow the professor time to read through them before class. A sample prompt is provided below:

"Your assignment is to write an approximately 500-word statement that expresses your personal sentiments about evolution. Do not study the text or read other sources on the subject; this is not a research paper. We're interested in reading your current, individual opinion. What is your concept of evolution? What are the words, images, or feelings that come to you when you hear that word? After reading your statement we should be able to know clearly what evolution means to you: how you define it, what you know or don't know about it, whether it evokes positive or negative feelings, and anything else that is relevant to your point of view. After you've described what that view is, explain how you've come to that position. What are your sources of information? Who's influenced you?"

Procedure

1. Show the class the poll data of evolution acceptance across religious traditions and emphasize the importance of evolution acceptance.
2. Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students to discuss, for about ten minutes, the question: "What have you heard or read about evolution?" This question will allow students to share whatever they want in a non-threatening manner in small groups.

3. Each group will post a summary of their discussion for the class (electronically or on the chalk/whiteboard).
4. The instructor can lead an open discussion about the different points mentioned and commenting on where they came from, asking what students think about them, and what implications they have for religion/faith. This will also allow the instructor to assess the range of viewpoints their class has. Discussion may focus on the reliability of the information and its source (blogs, websites, high school biology class, parents, etc.). The discussion can emphasize areas where there is potential conflict and/or compatibility between evolution and faith. This should take about 15 minutes.
5. Instructor should ask students to predict what the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' official position is on evolution. The instructor can administer a survey in class so that the results can be displayed for everyone.
6. The remaining time of the class will be the instructor's presentation/discussion on the Church's position on evolution. The instructor may choose to do this a variety of ways, but should do the following things:
 - a. Identify that First Presidency statements are the only official statements for the Church.
 - b. Detail the varied statements by Church leaders on evolution throughout the 20th century in their historical context. This may be presented at varying levels of detail given that there are the official statements and then many other unofficial statements. Depending on time and the instructor's preferences there may be some discussion with students about their reactions to the statements. Alternatively, this could also be done as a homework assignment after class by assigning an appropriate reading (see resources below).
 - c. Clearly identify that the official Church position is one of neutrality.
 - d. Discuss the idea of living with uncertainty. Explain that while we can have faith and a testimony in the gospel, the scriptures, the Restoration, Christ's Atonement, etc. it doesn't mean we have all truth. Perhaps a discussion on the meaning of the 9th Article of Faith will be helpful. However, we can still study secular topics and learn to the best of our ability. The challenge is being satisfied with the truths that affect our salvation and following the counsel to gain all the intelligence we can in this life (Doctrine & Covenants 130:18-19) with the knowledge at all will be revealed at a future time (Articles of Faith 1:9, Doctrine & Covenants 88:77-79).

Post-Class Assignment

Students will complete a reflective essay allowing them to express their understanding of evolution and religion after the entire evolution unit is completed. This essay should allow them to explore their thoughts regarding evolution and religion. Perhaps allow the students to reflect on how understanding the Church's position changes their attitudes toward evolution. A sample prompt is provided below:

"Now that we have finished our evolution unit, I would like you to return to the first essay you wrote on evolution prior to the unit. In a 300 – 500-word statement (about 4 paragraphs), please evaluate your personal views about the subject; how do you feel now in comparison to the way you felt at the beginning

of the semester? Carefully defend your present point of view. If there has been a change, describe it, and then attempt to explain the reasons for your new perspective. If there has not been a change (e.g., you accepted before and you still accept evolution; you didn't accept before and you still don't), please explain why."

Available Resources for Students and Instructors

Below are citations for some resources for instructors and students that may supplement this lesson module:

Readings

- Ash M (2002) The Mormon Myth of Evil Evolution. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35(2):19-38.
- Bertka CM, Pobiner B, Beardsley P, Watson WA (2019) Acknowledging students' concerns about evolution: a proactive teaching strategy. *Evolution: Education and Outreach* 12:3.
- Bradshaw WS, Phillips AJ, Bybee SM, Gill RA, Peck SL, Jensen JL (2018). A longitudinal study of attitude toward evolution among undergraduates who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *PLOS One* 13(11):e0205798.
- Dunk RDP, Barnes ME, Reiss MJ and 18 other authors (2019) Evolution education is a complex landscape. *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 3:327-329.
- BYU Evolution Packet - <http://biology.byu.edu/Portals/10/docs/Evolution%20Packet.pdf>
- Evenson WE, Jeffery DE (2005) *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, Inc.
- Manwaring KF, Jensen JL, Gill RA, Bybee SM (2015) Influencing highly religious undergraduate perceptions of evolution: Mormons as a case study. *Evolution: Education and Outreach* 8:23.
- Stanton AK (2016) Science and Our Search for Truth. *New Era* 45(7):26-29.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (2016). To the Point: What does the Church believe about evolution? *New Era* 45(10):41.

National Organizations

- American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) – was founded as an international network of Christians in the sciences - <https://network.asa3.org/>
- BioLogos – an organization founded by scientist to help bridge the gap between science and religion; they have articles, profiles, video, and curricula available - <https://biologos.org/>
- National Center for Science and Education – organization that promotes and defends accurate and effective science education, particularly evolution and climate change – <http://ncse.com/>
- Smithsonian's Broader Social Impacts Committee – a committee of individuals from diverse religious affiliations formed to assist in the dialogue surrounding the Smithsonian's exhibit on human evolution. <http://humanorigins.si.edu/about/broader-social-impacts-committee>

Statements on reconciliation from various religious perspectives -

<http://humanorigins.si.edu/about/broader-social-impacts-committee/members-member-resources>

Videos of thoughts on reconciliation from various religious perspectives -

<http://humanorigins.si.edu/about/broader-social-impacts-committee/thoughts-science-religion-and-human-origins>

Public event on the 30-year longitudinal study of BYU students -

<http://humanorigins.si.edu/about/broader-social-impacts-committee/public-event-religious-audiences-and-topic-evolution-lessons-classroom>

The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS) – organized by the Graduate

Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, this organization works at the intersection of science and theology - <http://www.ctns.org/index.html>