

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Stigmatization and Validation of Atheism, Literalism, and Non-Literalism in the Discourse over Evolutionary Theory

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This article explores how atheism, literalism, and non-literalism are validated and stigmatized in public discourse over evolutionary theory. Through an ethnographic content analysis of 1,028 letters to the editor, I examine how authors frame the relationship between acceptance of evolutionary theory and religious faith. I find there are four ways of doing so: 1) implicit polarization, obliquely denies any compatibility between religion and evolution; 2) distancing, separates one's position from that of another; 3) articulation, weaves evolution and faith together; and 4) combinations of polarization, distancing, and articulation. Each framing results in some mixture of stigmatization and validation of atheism, literalism, and non-literalism. Implicit polarization stigmatizes and validates atheism and literalism. Implicit polarization stigmatizes non-literalism through unacknowledgment. Distancing can validate and stigmatize literalism and non-literalism, while it also results in literalism and atheism being stigmatized by putative allies. Articulation validates non-literalism by representing it in the public sphere and it stigmatizes atheism and literalism through unacknowledgment.

Introduction

Much scholarship demonstrates the stigma experienced by unbelievers (Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Hammer et al. 2012). The American conflict over how to teach biological evolution is one place where this stigma is constructed and contested. The discourse on evolution serves to, perhaps inadvertently, define the relationship between science and religion. For example, Elsdon-Baker (2015) has demonstrated how the wording of survey questionnaires elides the diversity of perspectives and, thus, unintentionally categorizes certain respondents as opponents of evolutionary theory. This study will show how pro-evolution and anti-evolution statements¹ support and undermine atheism, literalism, and non-literalism.² Analyzing the controversy over evolution allows us to pick up on the implicit and oblique framings of faith and faithlessness that occur when the existence of God is not the only topic of conversation.

In what follows, I contextualize the conflict over teaching evolution and argue that examining it can uncover stigmatization processes. I then outline how I drew on the concept of framing to analyze 1,028 letters to the editor before presenting the results of this analysis. I find that there are four processes for framing the compatibility between faith and evolution. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of specific ways that atheism, literalism, and non-literalism are both stigmatized and validated by the discourse on evolutionary theory.

Conflict over Evolutionary Theory

There is no necessary contradiction between accepting Darwin's theory of natural selection (evolutionary theory) and having faith in God. Survey research demonstrates many adults experience no such conflict (Elsdon-Baker 2015). Qualitative inquiry shows how believers reconcile their faith with modern biology (Wuthnow 2012). Many elite scientists believe in God and accept evolutionary theory (Ecklund 2010). But while evolutionary theory may not be inherently atheistic, it is often thought to be so. This perception has led a substantial number of Americans to want non-scientific alternatives to be taught alongside evolutionary theory and, consequently, evolutionary biology is under-taught in many American classrooms (Berkman and Plutzer 2010). The appearance of a contradiction, then, has produced much conflict over public school science classes.

The treatment of evolutionary theory in public schools has been a front in the enduring American culture wars (Lienesch 2007). Since the 1970s anti-evolutionists have sought to introduce some doubt into the curriculum and/or to present the concept of "intelligent design" (Bowler 2007; Branch, Scott, and Rosenau 2010; Larson 2007; Numbers 2006). Most notably, in 2005 in Dover, Pennsylvania, the school board required biology teachers to mention the controversy surrounding evolutionary theory and to inform students that the textbook *Of Pandas and People*, available in the school library, provides an alternative account. The federal trial, *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* (2005), where this anti-evolutionist tactic was thoroughly rejected, generated national media attention. There were other less prominent battles as well.

For instance, in 2002 the school board of Cobb County, Georgia ordered the placement of disclaimers in biology texts that declared that biological evolution was a mere theory. Ultimately, the school board settled out of court. Some state school boards have tried to weaken evolution's place in the curriculum by altering science standards, and legislatures have also sought to empower teachers to undermine evolution. Additionally, anti-evolutionists have funded a multi-million dollar museum and a widely screened documentary (Branch, Scott, and Rosenau 2010). Each iteration of the conflict provides an opportunity for a more general discussion of evolutionary theory.

The conflict reveals how individuals construct religious belief in the public sphere. Once challenged, many will defend their position with "legitimations" (Berger 1967). For example, anti-evolutionists will neutralize criticisms by acknowledging and disagreeing with specific aspects of their opponent's claims (Silva 2014). As will be demonstrated below, these justifications, intentionally or unintentionally, produce definitions of both faith and atheism. Exploring legitimations of evolution and anti-evolutionism allows us to see a variety of constructions of faith. The manifestations of the controversy also provide some individuals with the opportunity to have a conversation about religion that is typically proscribed. Some promote atheism by framing non-belief as scientific. These disputes allow literalists to confront atheism. Finally, it is also a chance for non-literalist faith to be differentiated from both atheism and literalism and to explain how faith can persevere in the modern age. Such discourse both stigmatizes and validates atheism, literalism, and non-literalism.

Stigma and Framing

Goffman (1963, p. i) defines stigma as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance." Not all stigmata are equal, but to some extent, nearly everyone experiences some sense of inadequacy. Goffman's point holds true for atheism, literalism, and non-literalism, as well. Adherents of atheism (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006), literalism (Smith 1998), and belief in God more generally (Wuthnow 2012) are variably marginalized. Atheists are among the most stigmatized identities in the United States (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Literalists feel that they are second-class citizens (Smith 1998). Both literalist and non-literalist theism can be problematic because faith in God is "often" defined as "irrational, uninformed, undemocratic, destructive, [and] fraudulent" (Wuthnow 2012:17). It is plausible, then, that those who subscribe to some version of atheism, literalism, or non-literalism will wish to neutralize the stigma associated with their belief or lack thereof. It is well established that certain people define atheism and theism in relation to each other (Borer 2010; Cimino and Smith 2007; Taira 2012). For many, the conflict over how to teach evolutionary theory presents an opportunity to mitigate stigma by associating atheism with the prestige of science (e.g., Borer 2010; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Guenther 2014; Kettell 2013; Smith 2013; Taira 2012). Wuthnow (2012) has shown how religious Americans validate their faith as they negotiate potential conflicts with

science. Some believers engage in multivocality wherein numerous perspectives can be acknowledged. Others take no interest in contemplating the relationship between science and religion. A few reject science that contradicts their beliefs. Finally, there are those who cast scientific findings as a testament to the immensity of God and individuals who understand God as an enduring mystery. This study further explores such ideational processes by examining atheism, literalism, and non-literalism in relation to each other. This analysis will not tell us much about how atheists, literalists, and non-literalists feel about how their beliefs are defined in the public sphere. It will, however, show how discourse on evolutionary theory constructs those beliefs. The concept of framing is a useful concept for accomplishing these tasks.

A frame is "an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (Snow and Benford 1992: 137). Framing refers to the application of cultural schemata to particular situations to construct reality. Scholars have employed Goffman's (1974) notion of "framing" to capture the communicative and interpretive processes that occur in contentious public discourse (see Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2004). For example, Stobaugh and Snow (2010) identified how anti-evolutionists and evolutionists framed the conflict in Federal Court. Anti-evolutionists deployed a "protect religion" frame in *Scopes v. State of Tennessee* (1925) and *Epperson v. State of Arkansas* (1968). This framing poses evolutionary theory as a risk to faith in God. When this device failed in *Epperson*, anti-evolutionists moved to a "teach both sides" diagnostic frame for *McClellan v. Arkansas Board of Education* (1982) and *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987). The "teach both sides frame" held that students should be presented with both Biblical and scientific accounts of origins. When the Supreme Court ruled this approach was a violation of the First Amendment, anti-evolutionists transitioned to a "shut out of science discourse" frame that argued that intelligent design, a secularized alternative to evolutionary theory, was unduly censored from scientific consideration. This framing was unsuccessful in the aforementioned *Kitzmiller*. For their part, evolutionists have used two frames in these important court cases. In *Scopes*, evolutionists used a "teach evolution" frame which includes the idea that evolution is legitimate science and that it does not damage religious belief. In *Epperson* and subsequent cases, evolutionists successfully implemented a "challenges to evolution as religious" frame which asserts that religious ideas are disqualified from science classes.

Even minute alterations in the framing of a situation can influence decision making (see e.g., Kahneman 2011). While individuals are unevenly cognizant of how they are framing reality (much less how their framing influences others), much research has identified techniques and procedures that people use to manipulate the definition of the situation (see Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2004). The existing literature has identified three such processes that I will draw on in my analysis: *polarization*, *articulation*,

and *distancing*. McCaffrey and Keys (2000) demonstrate how political frames emerge as one engages with one's opponents. Among their observations is that individuals engage in "polarization" wherein they craft a "definitional dichotomy of 'us versus them'" (pg. 44). This process omits any middle ground between one and one's adversaries.³ For example, the terms pro-life and pro-choice systematically overlook the numerous positions one can take towards abortion. A second process is frame articulation which refers to how actors combine ideas. It "involves the connection and coordination of events, experiences, and strands of one or more ideologies so that they hang together in a relatively integrated and meaningful fashion. It constitutes a kind of collective packaging device that assembles and collates slices of observed, experienced, and/or recorded 'reality'" (Snow 2004: 400). For instance, Snow explains that one reason for Martin Luther King Jr.'s success was that he was able to join Christianity, Democracy, and Gandhian non-violence into a Civil Rights frame. Finally, distancing involves drawing a distinction between oneself and a stigmatized entity (Benford and Hunt 2003). For example, a vegetarian might explain how she is not advocating for veganism or a socialist might distinguish herself from a communist. Taken together, this examination of letters to the editor will demonstrate how these processes contribute to the stigmatization of atheism, literalism, and non-literalism.

Data and Methods

In this section, I explain why letters to the editor are appropriate data. I then outline how I collected and qualitatively analyzed them.

Letters as Data

Letters to the editor are ideal data for uncovering framing processes. First, letters represent natural communication acts. They are not subject to the biasing effects of an interviewer. Second, letters to the editor are a place where people offer definitions of the situation in the public sphere. Correspondingly, letters are a measure of American political culture (Perrin 2005). Third, letters provide readers with access to how others outside of their interpersonal networks construct reality (Wahl-Jorgensen 2004). Fourth, letters are reasonably brief and numerous, allowing an analyst to examine the gradations of meanings (Silva 2007, 2013, 2014). Fifth, letters allow otherwise marginalized perspectives to be represented in the public sphere (Young 2011).

Letters do have some limitations. Newspapers' share of the public sphere has been declining for many years (Kohut et al. 2012). While newspaper editors wish to allow a range of opinions (Nielsen 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen 2004), they do play a gatekeeping role (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Additionally their brevity leads to some ambiguous sentiments. While it is advantageous that the researcher cannot influence letter writers, researchers cannot ask follow-up questions, either. One could argue, however, that probing questions only uncover a vocabulary of motives (or set of culturally acceptable explanations) and not the actual motivation of the subject (Mills 1940).

Data Collection

The data are combined from two other projects. The first has been reported on in Silva (2013) and an analysis of the second was recounted in Silva and Lowe (2015). I acquired the first sample from the NewsBank database. In my searches for letters published between 1987 and 2004, I used the terms *letter*, *letters*, *intelligent design*, and *creationism*. There was a tremendous amount of data, so I collected the letters by time period (e.g., letters from April 2000, then May 2000). I began my searches with the year 1987 because preliminary inquiries had only yielded a relative few letters published in 1985 and 1986. After I had collected a substantial amount of data, I decided that I should also include the terms *Darwin* and *evolution* to increase the diversity of the collected letters. These terms were included for searches of letters published between 2005 and 2008 and resulted in 32 letters that would not have otherwise been collected (see also Silva 2013, page 73, footnote 5). Newspapers often publish letters on evolution in groups. Even if a letter dealt with the conflict but did not contain the search terms, it still had a chance to be included in the study if it was published alongside a letter that did contain the search term.

I collected 43,304 pages of raw data stored in 75 Microsoft Word files. Given the enormous amount of material, I took a random sample of the data. I selected 500 sections of letters to the editor (by section, I mean all of the letters to the editor that were published by a particular newspaper on a given day). To determine how many sections should be taken from each of the Microsoft Word files I found the proportion of the data included in the particular file (i.e., I divided the number of pages in the file by 43,304). Next, I multiplied this proportion by 500. I used the random number generator feature of a TI-85 calculator to select the page numbers from the data file. I took all of the sections that fell on a selected page number (i.e., if a sentence of a section of letters was on a selected page, I would take the entire section). For example, the first file had 240 pages of raw data, which accounts for 0.55 percent of the data set. Therefore, after multiplying by 500, I found that I should select three pages from this file. I then used the random number generator to choose the sections that could be found on pages 228, 200, and 126. If none of the material on a given page was appropriate for the study (i.e., it included the search terms but it was not a letter to the editor about evolutionary theory), I would scroll down through the file until I found a section of letters to the editor. If two sections could be found on a selected page, I would take both sections. This process resulted in a sample of 794 letters. The results of a previous analysis of these data have been published elsewhere (Silva 2013).

The second collection includes 234 letters collected from the LexisNexis Academic database. These letters, published between August 26, 2012 and August 23, 2013, were found with the search terms *letter*, *intelligent design*, *creationism*, *creation science*, *Darwin*, and *evolution*. Unfortunately, because the data have been combined from two different projects, the years 2009-2011 are left out of the resultant data set. This issue is offset by the

Table 1: Number of letters by time period.

Year	N
1987–1998	80
1999	66
2000	26
2001	14
2002	59
2003	30
2004	65
2005	318
2006	89
2007	22
2008	25
2012	78
2013	156
Total	1028

cross-sectional nature of the study. Additionally, there is little reason to believe that there are critical framing processes unique to those three years. Likewise, I added the search term “creation science,” which I did not use in the first sample. Of the three letters that use the term “creation science,” both also use search terms found in the previous sample, so no bias was introduced. Another study of this second sample has also been published elsewhere (Silva and Lowe 2015). Between the two collections, the sample includes 1,028 letters from 223 newspapers, in 47 states and Washington, D.C. were analyzed (all but Arkansas, Hawaii, and Rhode Island). **Table 1** shows the number of letters collected by year.

Preliminary Analysis

I conducted an ethnographic content analysis of the letters (Altheide and Schneider 2013). Correspondingly, I treated the letters similarly to data that come from qualitative interviews or participant observation. Although qualitative studies typically have small sample sizes, there are some advantages to be gained from this approach. First, despite the considerable number of letters, each one is relatively brief, so the total amount of data analyzed is likely similar to the amount of relevant data generated by hundreds of hours of observations or dozens of in-depth interviews. Second, the large sample size allows for the discovery of infrequent framings. Third, there are subtle distinctions that would go unnoticed with a smaller sample. Because there is only one coder on this project and because I am more interested in describing meanings than I am in quantifying the data, there is no measure of intercoder reliability. The reported frequencies should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

The analysis occurred in multiple stages as I moved back and forth between open and focused coding. I began with open coding of the first sample of 794 letters and moved

to focused coding as I discovered theoretically significant patterns in the data (Lofland et al. 2006). The results of the initial phases of this analysis have been presented (Silva and Smith 2012) and published (Silva 2013) elsewhere. Upon reflection, I decided that the data I had collected on evolutionary theory provided a glimpse into how people construct atheism and faith. In my previous study, I had coded for times when letter writers had explicitly mentioned atheists and Christians. Using NVivo, I re-examined these 175 letters to identify the ways authors defined atheists and Christians. I identified codes such as “anti-evolution equals Christian,” “atheism is absurd,” “atheism is religion,” and “atheists are not the only supporters of Evolutionary Theory.” Next, using NVivo, I created a new code of un/belief, which combined many of my original codes that indicated *any* acknowledgment of the theological dimensions of the conflict. Such codes included “science is more valuable than religion,” “Bible is valid,” and “religious faith and its benefits.” This new aggregated code covered 603 letters. Whereas in the initial phases, I had focused on the letters that had more explicitly discussed atheists and Christians, I was now examining letters that made any mention of faith, religion, or the lack thereof. At this stage, I excluded 191 letters that did not have the aggregated un/belief code from the analysis.

Secondary Analysis

Upon examining this combined code and consulting the literature on the general relationship between science and religion (Evans and Evans 2008; Ratzsch 2009), I realized that I could code certain letters as treating acceptance of evolutionary theory as equivalent with atheism and that others cast evolutionary theory as analytically distinct from faith in God. I then engaged in focused coding of letters that mentioned un/belief and coded for whether or not they treated atheism as equivalent or nonequivalent with evolutionary theory. I found a total of 557 letters that clearly contained one or both framings (284 contained equivalent only, 224 contained nonequivalent only, and 49 included both framings). Once I had done so, I examined the ways authors stigmatized various faith positions. Because the letters from the first sample were a bit dated (the most recent letters are from 2008), I applied the equivalence/nonequivalence coding scheme to the 234 letters in the second sample described above.

I then re-examined letters coded as equivalent and nonequivalent. I identified specific ways that letter writers arrived at equivalence or nonequivalence. I gave each of these framings a code which I describe in the findings section below. Additionally, I would compare similar but distinct codes by combining such sections with NVivo and comparing the codes to each other (e.g., evolution is not atheism and religious evolutionists). To deepen the analysis, I compared my findings with concepts from the literature on framing (i.e., the concepts of polarization, articulation, and distancing introduced above). Finally, I went back through all 1,028 letters (including those 191 that I had disregarded in earlier stages of the analysis) to establish a count of each of the types illustrated below.

Findings

Two framings of the relationship between evolution and faith emerged in 838 of the analyzed letters. In the “equivalence” frame, authors equate the acceptance of evolution with atheism, and vice versa. In the “nonequivalence” frame, authors treat the acceptance of evolution as independent of one’s faith or lack thereof. Both sides of the evolution conflict advance each frame.³ Letter writers constructed the equivalence frame through *implicit polarization*. They constructed nonequivalence through *distancing* and *articulation*. These three ways of framing religion and evolution are outlined in **Table 2**. There are two ways that these processes are combined. First, *qualified polarization* occurs when there is a combination of implicit polarizing and distancing/articulating framings within a letter. Second, there are also letters that include combinations of distancing and articulating that advance a non-literalist perspective. These framings result in the variably incidental and unintentional stigmatization and validation of atheism, literalism, and non-literalism.

Implicit Polarization

The equivalence frame casts atheists as supporters of evolutionary theory and believers as anti-evolutionists. This framing follows the conflict model of the relationship between science and religion, which holds that science and religion are at war with each other (Ratzsch 2009, see also Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013). Implicit

polarization occurs when authors do not acknowledge any belief in the compatibility between belief in God and evolution. One must choose between science and religion. The frame was created through implicit polarization in 298 letters – 167 anti-evolutionists letters, 123 evolutionist letters, and eight letters that were neutral.

Anti-Evolutionist Implicit Polarization

Anti-evolutionists⁴ polarization occurs when they argue that one must reject evolution to avoid nihilism. For example, one author writes, “evolution pushes God out of the picture and says we and the universe happened by chance without purpose or meaning” (Tamburello 2004). This author asserts that evolution is inherently faithless and meaningless. It is not merely a scientific explanation, but a repudiation of a believer’s worldview. This statement makes non-literalist faith invisible by not acknowledging those who reconcile faith and science.

Other anti-evolutionists performed implicit polarization by referring to anti-evolutionists as Christians. One author asserts, “Regarding evolution, scientists still haven’t provided any evidence or reason as to why some species evolve while others don’t. Christians know that God created man separately from the animals” (Osborn 2012). Another writes, “The way things are today, Christian children hardly have a chance because all of their rights seem to be taken away from them by non-Christians who have a problem with anything about God being said in a school”

Table 2: Findings.

Framing Process	Implicit Polarization	Distancing	Articulation
Definition	Obliquely denies compatibility between faith and evolution.	Claims one’s position is unlike that of another.	Connects two positions to each other.
Frame Constructed	Equivalence, evolutionary theory equated with atheism.	Nonequivalence, faith in God is independent of acceptance of evolution.	Nonequivalence, faith in God is independent of acceptance of evolution
Evolutionist Version(s)	E.g., evolution is evidence based, while faith is not.	1. Evolutionary theory from atheism. 2. Religion from science. 3. Non-literalism from literalism.	1. Evolutionist believers. 2. God involved with evolution. 3. Biblical reconciliation.
Anti-Evolutionist Version(s)	E.g., Christians reject evolution.	1. Anti-evolutionism distanced from faith. 2. Literalism from non-literalism.	Not applicable.
Stigmatizes Atheism by	casting it as a contaminant.	casting it as a contaminant, contradicting its truth claims.	not acknowledging its existence, contradicting its truth claims.
Stigmatizes Non-Literalism by	not acknowledging its existence, contradicting its truth claims.	casting it as inferior.	Not Applicable.
Stigmatizes Literalism by	casting it as a contaminant.	casting it as inferior, contradicting its truth claims.	not acknowledging its existence, contradicting its truth claims.
Validates Atheism by	representing its truth claims.	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
Validates Non-Literalism by	Not applicable.	representing its truth claims.	representing its truth claims.
Validates Literalism by	representing its truth claims.	representing its truth claims.	Not applicable.

(Olinger 2013). To be a Christian is to reject evolution. These authors do not use a specific term to distinguish evolutionist believers from anti-evolutionist believers. By implication, evolutionists are non-Christian or atheists.

Others explicitly reduce evolutionary theory to atheism, "Senator Rubio is right when he says there are multiple theories about the creation of the universe and that children should be exposed to them -- not just to the atheistic scenario favored by the scientific community" (Valliath 2012). A second author argues, "Logically, most intelligent design opposition originates from atheism's principles" (Littlejohn 2006). These letter writers label evolution as atheism. In doing so, they provide a justification for rejecting the theory. One cannot accept evolution without rejecting God. Evolution is not science; it is merely a competing worldview.

Evolutionist Implicit Polarization

Some evolutionists would similarly conflate anti-evolutionism with faith. One way of doing so was to assert that religion, in general, is unreasonable. For example:

Evolution has been proven and can be tested. ... On the contrary, there is no proof of god(s), and there is no way to test whether or not any exist. ... Why do people believe religions? They believe in the religion they are taught by their parents, because they are indoctrinated as guileless children (Weidman 2013).

In this excerpt, religion is presented as inferior to science, with opposition to evolution being a case in point. Religion is undifferentiated. Such framings ignore non-literalist theologies that accept evolution. Note the moral claims made while engaging in polarization. They are not simply wrong; they are guilty of indoctrination.

Likewise, certain evolutionists cast the conflict as a matter of science versus religion. For example, "The world is filled with religious nuts brainwashed from infancy. I have never been able to understand why supposedly intelligent people discount science and embrace religion" (Sheppard 2005). This author demeans all faith by contrasting it with science. Likewise:

Darwin is correct for one reason and one reason alone – the evidence he presented and since discovered is overwhelming. There is no other theory that can compete; if one arises, it will be based on fact, not mystical nonsense (i.e. religion) (Landis 2013).

Here evolution is equated with reason and evidence, and the author casts all religion as nonsense. For another example:

The United States is the only industrialized nation with a large percentage of its population still believing in the biblical account of the "beginning of time." This is pathetic. Religion is a nasty remnant of our ignorant past. With what we now know, anyone who still believes in talking snakes and the

parting of the seas and such is an idiot, plain and simple (Bowen 2012).

This author attacks anti-evolutionism as pathetic before generalizing to all religion as ignorance.

Another version of this framing involves the denunciation of scripture. For example, "If we did come from Adam and Eve, doesn't that make us a race of inbreds, from ancestors who practiced incest? Maybe that explains why the world can be in such a mess at times" (Bacon 1998). Similarly, two other authors argue:

Science is just that – science. Not a class on mythology. There is more evidence as to the theories of evolution than the beautiful story that was passed down in the literature known as the Bible or Holy Scriptures. There are too many holes in the story. Intelligent Design does not explain how the brides of Cain and Able so spontaneously "appeared" in the picture. Teach your children whatever mythology you chose in your home or church. Leave the science to real science, not fantasy (Crosby 2002).

It is not possible that the book of Genesis is an accurate description of the origin of the human race. It was written by Moses, a Jew, around 1400 BC. Moses was six generations from Abraham, who was 18 generations from Adam (Sciotti 2013).

These authors link anti-evolutionism to faith and proceed to ridicule Genesis.

Finally, some evolutionists polarized the debate by arguing that the world appears chaotic and unjust. For instance, "What kind of intelligence would design a world in which 40,000 children are dying every day from starvation and disease? Why should this design be called 'intelligent'" (Balliet 2001)? This author is not only claiming that intelligent design is unscientific, but ontologically unsound, as well. This argument leaves no room for a God who cares about humanity.

Distancing

There are two ways of framing a non-conflictual relationship between faith in God and acceptance of evolutionary theory: distancing, which I discuss in this sub-section, and articulation, which I outline in the following subsection. Distancing, found in 497 letters, results from authors extricating atheism from evolutionary theory or faith from anti-evolutionism. There are five types of distancing: anti-evolutionism from faith, evolutionary theory from atheism, science from religion, literalism from non-literalism, and non-literalism from literalism.

Anti-Evolutionism Distanced from Faith

In 134 letters, authors distanced anti-evolutionism from religious faith. For example:

There is a growing number of scientists who have changed their beliefs from evolution to creationism, not because they have accepted Christianity,

but simply because they finally gave up on baseless facts of evolution. They have accepted creationism based upon the scientific facts it contains (Sutton 1999).

According to this letter, Christianity (and presumably faith in God) is not a requisite for the rejection of evolutionary theory. Anti-evolutionism is scientifically, not religiously, motivated. It ostensibly agrees with atheistic claims that science is superior to religion. This type of argument sacrifices faith to attack evolution.

Similarly, claims that evolution is faith based represent another type of distancing. One author writes, “belief in the theory of evolution requires great faith” (Harrison 2012). For another example, “Since there are no peer-reviewed, repeatable scientific experiments proving any organism can and has evolved into a completely different kind of organism, evolutionists must believe it happened. That’s their religion, not sound science” (Hampton 2012: 9A)! In these examples, the authors discredit evolutionary theory as religious. In doing so, they distance anti-evolutionism from faith. It uses the same dichotomy between religion and science (more prominently used by evolutionists) to claim that evolutionary theory is illegitimate. Creationists, who tend to be religious, then, are making and reading anti-evolutionist arguments that stigmatize faith. One wonders if the stigmatizing statements from allies have the same influence as those that come from opponents?

Evolutionary Theory from Atheism

In 50 letters, authors distanced evolutionary theory from atheism. One letter writer asserts, “to accept Charles Darwin’s ideas (and those of modern science in general) you don’t have to be an atheist. Darwin himself was never an atheist” (Padian 2013). Another declares, “I am not an atheist” (Dormann 2004). With the first excerpt, acceptance of evolutionary theory is framed as nonequivalent with atheism by claiming that Darwin was not an atheist. The other evolutionist accomplishes this task by asserting that he is not an atheist. The implication of both excerpts is that one can support evolution without being an atheist. Separating atheism from evolutionary theory could imply that not believing in God is problematic.

Others circuitously distanced evolution from atheism. For instance, “Believing in evolution is no way equivalent to saying there is no God” (Ultsch 2008). Likewise, “Faith in one’s God should not be threatened by the theory of evolution” (Moreau 1999). These excerpts do not appear to be ridiculing atheism. Nonetheless, they do suggest that something is wrong with “saying there is no God” or “threatening” faith. These letters present atheism as discrediting – otherwise, there would be no need to explain why the theory is not atheistic. Additionally, decoupling atheism from evolutionary theory undermines an argument that some atheists make when crafting their identities (e.g., Guenther 2014; Smith 2013). Regardless of authorial intent, this form of distancing aligns non-literalism against certain expressions of atheism.

Religion from Science

Another mode of distancing separates the functions of science from those of religion. This framing, found in 163 letters, argues that science and religion have disparate social roles. They are not incompatible because they have discrete questions and different methods. An implication of this framing is that one does not need to choose between science and religion, but one cannot practice both simultaneously (Ratzsch 2009). Some letters would argue for the independence of science and religion by casting the two modes of thought as having disconnected functions and social locations. For example, “The late biologist Stephen Jay Gould suggested the metaphor of “non-overlapping magisteria” -- the concept that science and religion operate in two distinct, legitimate realms” (Cahana 2012). Another argues, “Science deals with the natural world; religion is beyond its scope” (Eisenlord 1995). A third explains:

Science and religion are fundamentally different in how they determine what is true. Religion is based on faith. Science is based on experimental results. ... Ultimately, science and religion ask different questions. Science asks “how,” while religion asks “who” and “why.” Intelligent design seems mostly to be about “who,” so I place it firmly in the category of religion (Patterson 2005).

These evolutionists distance religion from science by claiming different tasks for each. They assert that science and religion are analytically distinct. Because they have different functions, they need not be in conflict with each other. This means of distancing often overlaps with arguments that distance evolution from atheism. By asserting that both have separate spheres, one neither accepts nor opposes faith or faithlessness.

In some versions of this framing, authors explicitly conclude religion and science should occur in different places. For instance, “This doesn’t require rocket science: Teach science in class and teach religion in Sunday school” (Kennedy 2013). Likewise, “Since in the United States, at least so far, particular religious beliefs or no religious beliefs whatever share equal protection under the law, the public school curriculum should reject the intrusion of religious dogma of any stripe” (Gold 2004). The first author validates both science and religion by suggesting that each has a legitimate place. The second author uses the term “dogma” in a pejorative manner, but also avers that religious belief deserves legal protection. Both wish to segregate science and religion. Of course, such a limitation on religion does not fit with literalism. Nor does it conform to the view of religion advocated by some atheists. By disentangling evolutionary theory from faith, non-literalists create an ideological space for themselves.

Literalism from Non-Literalism

There were 50 letters where anti-evolutionists distinguish literalist from non-literalist theology. For example, “After all these years, evolution is still only a theory. It is a belief for those who refuse to believe in God, or in the

power of God, to create our present living world” (Skilton 2002). Another concludes, “Theistic evolution is merely an accommodation to atheistic evolution” (Hite 2013). In the first excerpt, the author suggests that evolutionist believers deny the power of God. In the second letter, the author presents theistic evolution as acquiescing to atheism. Unlike implicit polarization, these statements recognize belief systems that accept evolution. These arguments construct a nonequivalence frame. They are not concluding that evolutionary theory is simply atheism. Instead, they make the less ambitious claim that non-literalists have diminished faith. It stigmatizes non-literalism by presenting it as a weaker form of faith.

Non-Literalism from Literalism

In 206 letters, evolutionists distinguish between literalist and non-literalist perspectives by associating anti-evolutionism with literalism. For example, “Some Christian fundamentalists would like for us to return to the Dark Ages beginning with teaching creationism in our public schools and rejecting evolution” (Gillock 2007). Another writes, “Far from being scientific, Intelligent Design theory is nothing more than the latest attempt by fundamentalist Christians to force their religious beliefs into the public schools” (Green 2002). These authors specifically identify anti-evolutionism with literalist or “fundamentalist” belief. Literalism is only one type of faith; therefore, such a framing implicitly creates a space between non-literalism and literalism. Additionally, these excerpts stigmatize literalism as ignorant and autocratic. Others would also suggest that literalists are a numerical minority:

[Creationism] affirms that the earth was created in seven days less than 10,000 years ago, a belief system that is so indefensible on the basis of scientific evidence that it has long been discarded by all major religions, save certain fundamentalists (Oliver 1996).

The creationist position is wholly without merit as science, and of dubious merit as theology. It represents a narrow, literal interpretation (rejected by most mainstream religions) of ancient, contradictory texts. It ignores the intellectual progress of the last 2,000 years (Bleckmann 2004).

In addition to defending evolution, these authors marginalize literalism. They stigmatize it as isolated and unreasonable. Non-literalism is willing to change with new information, while literalism is ossified.

In another version of this framing technique, evolutionists identify anti-evolutionism with conservatism. For instance, “In fact, there can be no “compromise” with the religious right when it comes to teaching science to people -- children most especially” (Holian 2003). For a second example, “Across America, right-wing Christian children and adults are taught that evolution is “evil.” Their “alternative theory,” creationism, ignores evidence, never corrects errors and is based on selected quotations” (Wittshirk 2004). The first two excerpts connect

anti-evolutionism with the Right and, thus, implicitly suggest that liberals and moderates are pro-evolution. The “matter of fact” tone implies that such a connection is so obvious that it does not require empirical support.

The above subsection demonstrates how authors create nonequivalence through various distancing moves. Below I show how nonequivalence is also constructed by weaving faith and science together.

Articulating Faith and Evolution

Frame articulation, found in 142 letters, is the second way of constructing the nonequivalence frame. Although articulation often occurs alongside distancing, it is an analytically distinct process. There were 99 letters that had both distancing and articulation, 398 instances of distancing without articulation, and 43 letters with articulation but no distancing. Distancing explains how two entities are unlike each other and articulation connects two different objects. There were three ways of articulating evolution and faith: by citing the existence of believers who accept evolution, explaining how one could think of evolution as God’s method, and reconciling the Bible and modern science.

Evolutionist Believers

A typical articulation (96 letters) between belief and acceptance of evolution is to indicate the existence of individuals who accept both. Some non-literalists offered personal testimony. For example, “I am among millions of Christians who accept the overwhelming scientific evidence for evolution” (Gill 1999). Another declares, “As a devout Christian, evolutionary biologist and science teacher, I am qualified to comment. Scientists are not opposed to creationism or its teaching. We are only opposed to teaching it in the science classroom” (Gaines 2003). These authors use their identity as support for the claim that one can be a believer and an evolutionist.

Others offer a broader accounting of religious believers. For instance, “Most Christians and other people of faith reconciled with science long ago, because it was the intelligent thing to do” (Axsmith 1999). Likewise, “The late Pope John Paul II said in 1996 that evolution was not incompatible with faith. Many mainstream Protestant churches, such as the Presbyterians, have said there is no contradiction between evolution and creation” (Adams 2005). These framings are similar to efforts to distance creationism from faith by arguing that only certain religions *reject* evolution. Here, the emphasis is on highlighting that many religions *accept* the theory. This technique, on its own, does not show how non-literalism can adjust to the contradictions between scripture and science. These statements merely assert that evolutionist believers exist. The next types show how non-literalism squares faith and evolution (see also Wuthnow 2012).

God Involved with Evolution

In 73 letters, non-literalists invoke the nonequivalence frame by claiming that God works through evolution. For instance, “A creator who can come up with gravity, general and special relativity, Maxwell’s equations, and all the other wonderful physical laws can surely invent and

guide evolution" (Casteel 1996). Another writes, "There is no inherent contradiction in the concept that the creation of the universe, and the plan for our role in it, is the act of an all-powerful God who then let his creation take its evolutionary course" (Mills 2006). For a third example, "I believe evolution is simply, and only, one of God's tools in his ongoing creation" (Hixon 1989). These quotations represent typical ways of arguing that God is involved in the evolutionary process. Essentially, these authors explain that evolution is God's method. Neither atheism nor literalism accepts this proposition, of course.

Likewise, others suggest that evidence for evolution is also evidence for God. For instance, "In fact, the very idea that all life might have developed through a beautiful and delicate process over the course of billions of years could well be evidence of a higher power in and of itself" (Wasserman 1999). Another writer offers, "Many people, including scientists, look to the evolutionary process as evidence of God's work" (Madrigal 1999). These sorts of frames explain how one can believe in God and also accept evolutionary theory. Notice how the second excerpt moves from citing the existence of religious scientists to arguing for how they integrate science and theology into a coherent worldview. The next technique reconciles evolution and the Bible.

Biblical Reconciliation

Non-literalists occasionally (31 letters) articulated faith and evolution by providing an interpretation that aligns the Bible with acceptance of evolution. Such an approach reconciles faith and science. There were three overlapping ways of doing so. First, one could claim that others should not interpret the Bible literally. For example, "The Bible is a wonderful book, full of wonderful stories, yet the writing also contains a great deal of powerful symbolism. Genesis does not record actual happenings, it is purely symbolism" (Thompson 1999). A second explains:

The world's sacred scriptures were written by pre-scientific peoples as they saw the world, using literature, poetry and myth in an effort to grapple with the meaning of human existence and its end. In today's world, where fast cultural and technological change threatens to overwhelm us with anxiety, insecurity and marginality, literal interpretation of these scriptures can become a conservative force, empowering us to resist the changes of modernity that threaten us (Hirtle 2013).

Both of these authors assert that the Bible is not meant to be interpreted literally. Therefore, contradictions between science and scripture are not an impediment to acceptance of evolutionary theory.

Second, authors resolved apparent contradictions between the Bible and evolutionary theory by explaining how scripture does not contradict established science:

How can the two coincide? Genesis tells us that the world and all living things were created in six days. But we need to remember that the concept of a "day" is a human invention. From God's perspective, a day may be a thousand years, a million years,

a billion years, who knows? Time, to God, is surely inscrutable (Klabunde and Klabunde 2005).

All life began in the sea. The waters were parted, land appeared. There are few contradictions except for the concept of "days." I think "day" was meant to suggest a segment of time. Substitute eons. I believe the creator exists in timeless eternity with millions of years to devote to perfecting evolution (D'Amato 2005).

These authors suggest that Genesis is essentially in keeping with the scientific literature. This reading depends on not interpreting the seven days of creation as a 168 hour period. The second author asserts that the Biblical account is roughly similar to the one given by science

Third, authors would argue for the non-scientific function of the Bible:

The purpose of these verses is not to show any scientific detail, but to show his power and loving nature. It also established the principal of the [S]abbath rest that people would not constantly work toward the achievement of human goals, but stop and take time to honor and relate to God (Hemenway 2005).

Creationism, or intelligent design, are pseudosciences that try to Westernize an ancient Middle Eastern bit of Jewish storytelling into the literal and absolute truth about nature. The Bible, however, is about faith and finding meaning and hope in the human condition; it is not meant to be a science primer on natural phenomenon (Brandstetter 2002).

These types of letters do not claim that the Bible corresponds to the scientific explanation of the development of life. But they do contend that the real purpose of the Bible is to provide one's life with meaning and guidance. Because the Bible is not meant to be taken literally, one can accept it and scientific accounts that contract Biblical narrative. The controversy over evolution, then, is an opportunity to advocate for a non-literalist approach to the Bible.

Combinations

In the previous subsections, I focused on how letter writers perform specific framing techniques. In practice, authors often use these methods in combinations with each other. To outline all of these permutations would go beyond the scope of this article. However, I will discuss two broad patterns. First, some authors craft a qualified polarization by mixing equivalence and nonequivalence frames. Second, non-literalists often forge their arguments by combining distancing and articulation techniques.

Qualified Polarization

There were 208 letters – 110 anti-evolutionist, 96 evolutionist, two neutral – that I categorized as qualified polarization because they have a mixture of equivalence and nonequivalence frames. For example:

[1.] It amazes me that Christians are looked upon as the ones who have such great faith, because they believe in creation of the universe by God, [2.] when it takes a whole lot more faith in a theory that the world and universe was evolved by a Big Bang (Snodgrass 1999).

This excerpt switches from polarization to distancing anti-evolution from faith. In part one, the author defines Christians as those who believe in creation by God and rejecting the ideas of evolution or the Big Bang. He does not recognize theologies that accept both evolution and God. In part two, the author distances anti-evolutionism from religion by denigrating the Big Bang as faith-based.

For an evolutionist example, after supporting evolutionary theory, the following author oscillates between the equivalence and nonequivalence frames:

[1.] You cannot call yourself a Christian and also claim to be a critical thinker. [2.] Some Christians believe in evolution (the Vatican, for one), [3.] but still Christianity is a stumbling journey that leads to one believing in a sky god that impregnates a woman who bears a son who dies and is resurrected (Thomas 2013).

In part one, the excerpt draws on the equivalence frame by claiming that Christians are not critical thinkers. By implication, then, belief in God is associated with anti-science attitudes. In part two, however, the letter uses the nonequivalence frame when admitting that there are Christians who accept evolutionary theory. In part three, the nonequivalence frame is again deployed by insinuation when the author casts Christianity as irrational.

Combinations without Polarization

Distancing and articulation would also be combined without polarization in 332 letters. This combination serves to construct a non-literalist view of evolutionary theory. For example:

I think I am in the majority when I say I have no problem believing in God and in evolution. I don't believe that evolution happened merely by chance, as the atheists believe. Nor do I believe that the world was created in six days as it is laid out in the Bible, as the creationists believe (Goldstein 1999).

This excerpt begins with an articulation of faith and acceptance of evolution. The author claims that most people take this position, implicitly marginalizing atheism and literalism. He continues by explicitly distancing atheism from support for evolution. He reduces atheism to meaninglessness, "happened by chance." The excerpt also creates a gap between non-literalists and literalists. The author rejects anti-evolutionist claims of a six day creation of the world. The author thus opens a space for non-literalism by moving away from the two polarized positions and moving towards an integration of faith and science. For another example, "Evolution explains the 'how' of the universe, not

the 'who.' It makes no sense to equate knowledge of the scientific theory of evolution with atheism, when religious leaders such as the [P]ope has found it to be no threat" (Fried 2000). This author distances science from religion by arguing science does not ask "who" created the universe. Likewise, she distances atheism from evolution. The distancing is accomplished through articulating evolutionary theory with an example of a religious leader, the Pope, who accepts it. Again, while distancing and articulation are different processes, non-literalists use them in combination to establish their perspective in the public sphere.

Unintentional Stigmatization

Of course, it is impossible to know the actual motives of the letter writers (see Mills 1940). It is not too much of a speculative leap, however, to assume that many authors did not intend to undermine or demean a particular belief system. Regardless of authorial intent, however, any definition of the relationship between evolutionary theory and faith conflicts with other non/religious positions. For example, the following articulation of faith and acceptance of evolutionary theory does not seem to be an attack on atheism or literalism, "It's God's will that we accept nature as revealed to us by data. That clearly is her intent. Over time we will learn even more. Only a Supreme Being could encompass the beauty of the evolutionary process" (Kissinger 2012). This statement provides an example of a means of integrating faith in God with acceptance of evolution. It does not directly mention, much less vilify, other points of view. Nonetheless, this assertion contradicts the truth claims of atheists who use evolutionary theory to justify rejection of the belief in God. It also counters the arguments of literalists who believe that evolution is not compatible with their reading of Genesis. It is stigmatizing because it challenges the claims that validate atheism and literalism.

In other cases, the conflict over evolution was only briefly referenced:

Instead of tackling the issues that really matter to most of us, [state Republican legislators] continue to dabble in legislation concerning the teaching of evolution, banning the word "gay" from schools, banning contraception, putting children back to work, allowing Ten Commandments in public places, proclaiming a day of prayer to combat drought, etc (Boyd 2013).

The question of how to teach evolutionary theory is not the focus of this letter. Instead, the author places it among some other political positions supposedly taken by Republicans. Nonetheless, it labels anti-evolutionists as conservatives. Such a framing undermines the claims of those who equate anti-evolutionism with all faith. He implies that only certain kinds of believers (literalists) reject evolution.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to our understanding of religion and nonreligion by examining how individuals construct the relationship between faith and evolutionary theory in

a natural setting. It also adds to the literature by including non-literalism in the analysis (see also Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013). American public discourse on evolutionary theory tends to frame atheism as equivalent to evolutionary theory through polarization and, conversely, to frame atheism as nonequivalent with evolutionary theory through distancing and articulation. In this concluding section, I will discuss the ways each framing process validates and stigmatizes these three perspectives. I then consider the limitations of this study as well as offer suggestions for future scholarship.

Validation and Stigmatization

This study builds on previous research by elucidating how stigmatization of atheism occurs. The American conflict over evolutionary theory results in the non/religious “legitimations” (Berger 1967) being supported and opposed. When authors construct the nonequivalence frame through distancing and articulation and equivalence through polarization, not only are they defining evolutionary theory, they are also maintaining a particular approach to theology. The various framings of the relationship between God and evolutionary theory work to stigmatize and validate atheism, literalism, and non-literalism. These effects vary, however.

Both sides’ use of implicit polarization defines evolutionary theory as coterminous with atheism. This process validates both atheism and literalism. Many adherents of each perspective would agree that evolutionary theory is incompatible with religious faith. Such implicit polarization, then, provides representation to both literalism and atheism in the public sphere. In this sense, certain anti-evolutionist and evolutionist statements contribute to the viability of their supposed adversary.

Implicit polarization also stigmatizes atheism, literalism, and non-literalism. Some anti-evolutionist authors would undermine evolutionary theory by describing it as atheistic. The implication being that an association with atheism is damaging. Likewise, some evolutionists would attack anti-evolutionism by framing it as faith-based. Atheism and theism are thus constructed as sources of contamination. Finally, non-literalist beliefs are stigmatized by polarization. Although non-literalism is compatible with support for evolutionary theory, implicit polarization reduces non-literalism to either atheistic acceptance of evolution or faith-based rejection of science. Implicit polarization does not treat non-literalism as a contaminant; rather, it is not worth mentioning. Qualified polarization, by contrast, offers non-literalism a measure of recognition. It replaces unacknowledgment of non-literalists with a more direct admonishment.

Distancing is the process of framing one’s position as distinct from another viewpoint. Anti-evolutionists engage in distancing by accusing evolutionary theory of being a faith-based religion or claiming that there are secular motivations for rejecting evolution. This framing implies that faith diminishes credibility. Likewise, evolutionists separate atheism from evolution and science from religion to claim that evolution is not a threat to belief. These types of arguments validate non-literalism

by representing its truth claims. Such distancing, by contrast, is stigmatizing to atheism insofar as it suggests that unbelief is something to be avoided. With these types of distancing, literalism and atheism are challenged by their putative allies. For example, creationists, who are typically religious, wind up making and reading anti-evolutionist arguments that disparage faith. Similarly, those atheists who “legitimize” (Berger 1967) themselves with evolutionary theory are undercut by evolutionists who distance science from religion.

Distancing also occurs as authors differentiate non-literalism from literalism and vice versa. Both types of belief are stigmatized and validated by these efforts. Anti-evolutionists present non-literalism as inferior to literalism and evolutionists cast literalism as beneath non-literalism. Taken together, literalism and non-literalism are both validated and stigmatized as both theological approaches are defined as superior by some and lesser by others.

Non-literalists validate themselves by articulating faith and acceptance of evolution. Explaining that there are evolutionists who are believers or that the Bible can be interpreted to allow for evolution shows how non-literalism is possible – that one can have faith without rejecting science. Such framings can mitigate the claim that faith is irrational. Unlike distancing, literalism and atheism are not targeted or treated as contaminants. Nonetheless, these arguments damage the frames that support certain versions of literalism and atheism. Moreover, in the occasional times when distancing does not accompany articulation, literalism and atheism suffer stigmatization through unacknowledgment. A basic premise of many sorts of literalism/atheism is not only contradicted, but it is not given the courtesy of being directly addressed. Unintentionally and indirectly, then, articulation contributes to the stigmatization of literalism and atheism.

Limitations and Future Research

Future research can extend this article quantitatively, longitudinally, and qualitatively. Quantitatively, it would be interesting to *reliably* measure whether implicit polarization, distancing, and articulation appear most often. Likewise, what factors influence these processes? This study suggests that distancing is much more prevalent than articulation. If that finding were to hold up in a quantitative study, it would indicate that non-literalism is more likely to be constructed in relation to atheism and literalism rather than as its own entity. It would also suggest that atheists and non-literalists are rather unlikely to suffer from unacknowledgment.

The data for the above analysis come from a particular and ever shrinking segment of the public sphere, readers of print newspapers. Correspondingly, it is unknown whether the norms governing letters to the editor are operable in radio call-in shows, blog posts, Facebook comments, Reddit, and so forth. On the one hand, some of the structural features of letters to the editor exist in other forums. Letter writers, Facebook users, and many bloggers lack anonymity, for instance. Of course, other places in the public sphere provide greater anonymity, and, thus, less accountability. Somewhat like the

newspaper editor, websites often have moderators that serve a gatekeeping role. How, then, does the framing of evolution and faith vary by context? Do other framings emerge? How, if at all, does stigmatization and validation change?

This study does not explore how the frequency of polarization, distancing, and articulation vary over time. This work can be extended longitudinally by examining how the discourse changes. Did the rise of intelligent design or New Atheism magnify some framings? How do non-literalism, literalism, and atheism dialogically influence each other? The patterns identified in this study could provide the framework for a coding scheme that could address these questions.

The public debate over evolution provides non-literalism with an opportunity to be stigmatized. The ultimate impact of these differential patterns of stigmatization and validation, however, is still unknown. Smith (1998) suggests that liberal Protestantism is weakened by a lack of conflict with mainstream culture. Perhaps, then, the conflict over evolutionary theory might invigorate non-literalist faith. One could examine this matter longitudinally. Ultimately, it could be that the controversy over evolutionary theory builds atheism, literalism, and non-literalism. To the extent that certain people are motivated to find meaning through non/religious identity, then, resolution to the controversies over evolutionary theory are unlikely to be found.

Further qualitative analysis could uncover how atheists, non-literalists, and literalists respond to the sorts of stigmatization that this study identifies. This article has shown how atheist claims are challenged by evolutionists and anti-evolutionists alike, but, to what extent are adherents of either approach troubled by these framings? Is it more alienating to be contradicted by one's supposed allies than one's named adversaries? It is one thing for a set of ideas to be denounced by opponents. It is perhaps another thing to be undercut by presumed supporters. Future research should consider whether stigmatizing statements from allies have the same influence as those that come from opponents. Likewise, this study provides evidence of anti-evolutionists distancing their position from faith (see also Silva 2014). Are anti-evolutionists alienating themselves by distancing creationism from faith? What is the phenomenological experience of disavowing central parts of one's worldview? Finally, non-literalist positions often go unacknowledged. Is having one's legitimations directly confronted more or less impactful than having them ignored?

Beyond stigma and identity construction, conflicts over religion provide an opportunity to examine how both the religious and nonreligious maintain their realities (Berger 1967). I have focused on how these techniques operate in isolation. I have given less consideration to how people use these techniques in tandem. To do so, one would need to identify the various combinations of polarization, distancing, and articulation. By examining the varieties of atheist, literalist, and non-literalist perspectives, we might gain a sense of whether cultural conflicts are causes and/or solutions to anomie. Hopefully, this study has provided

support for such studies and to our continuing understanding of atheism.

Notes

¹ There are myriad positions that one can take towards evolutionary theory (Scott 1997). In the United States, the conflict has largely centered on how the theory will be treated in public school classrooms. Accordingly, I define anti-evolutionist statements as those which directly argue for a reduction of the theory in the classroom (e.g., claiming the theory should not be taught, calling for the consideration of creationist alternatives) and/or those that contest it (e.g., claiming that evolution is atheistic, denigrating liberals who support evolutionary theory). By contrast, I define evolutionist statements as those that either 1. oppose any curricular diminution of the theory, 2. argue that others should accept the theory (e.g., mentioning the support of the scientific community), and/or 3. treat the acceptance of evolution as a given without referring to opposition (e.g., referring to research that is based on evolutionary theory (Silva and Lowe 2015)).

² The term atheism rather than non-religion or secularism is appropriate here because it is the alleged godlessness of evolutionary theory that is at the crux of much anti-evolutionist discourse (see Lee 2012). My use of the terms literalist and non-literalist follow Hunter's (1991) distinction between orthodox and progressive perspectives. The orthodox perspective involves a "commitment to an eternal, definable, and transcendental authority" (1991, p. 44). The orthodox perspective is demonstrated by those who adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible. Such a view is incompatible with evolutionary theory. By contrast, he defines progressives, as those who "resymbolize historic faith according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life" (1991, p. 44–45). This orientation allows for the existence of God and evolution. While there are many varieties of atheism, literalism, and non-literalism, each has some basic premises in common. Atheism would hold that God does not exist and therefore had no influence on the evolution of living things. Literalism rejects evolutionary theory on the grounds that it contradicts the Bible or other scriptures. Non-literalism accepts evolutionary theory by taking a symbolic approach to the Bible or other scriptures.

³ McCaffrey and Keys use the term "polarization-vilification" which combines the process of polarization with the process of vilification (a "rhetorical strategy that discredits adversaries by characterizing them as ungenue, malevolent advocates" (Vanderford 1989: 166 quoted in McCaffrey and Keys 2000: 44)). I find that my data is better covered by the term polarization than polarization-vilification.

⁴ Theoretically, I do not know if a letter writer is *actually* a non-literalist, literalist, or atheist. Nonetheless, for stylistic reasons, the presentation of these findings will proceed as if I know the perspective of the author.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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