

8 Issues with the “Church History: Organic Evolution” Web Page

On pages 50-51, the Let’s Talk about Science and Religion authors quote from the Church History Organic Evolution page on the church website. (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/organic-evolution?lang=eng>)

Let’s talk about some issues with this ‘Church History: Organic Evolution’ web page.

1. The Organic Evolution page claims that in 1910, Joseph F. Smith taught that we should not undertake “**to say how much of evolution is true, or how much is false.**” They didn’t cite any source for this quote, but I will provide it and reveal the **stirring truths which the full quote reveals**, which is quite the contrary of that which was suggested by taking only a little clipping of it. Here it is, from the Juvenile Instructor, and yes this one (unlike the other alleged 1910 quote) does have Joseph F. Smith’s name typed at the end of it (you can view it here:



<https://archive.org/details/juvenileinstruct464geor/page/208/mode/2up>)

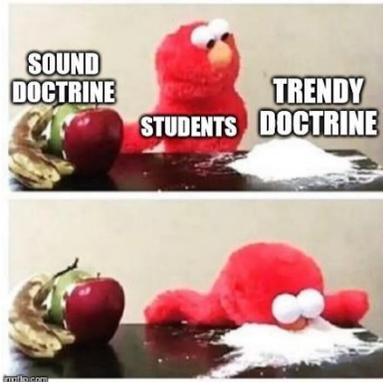
“Philosophy and the Church Schools. Some questions have arisen about the attitude of the Church on certain discussions of philosophy in the Church schools. Philosophical discussions as we understand them, are open questions about which men of science are very greatly at variance. As a rule we do not think it advisable to dwell on questions that are in controversy, and especially questions of a certain character, **in the courses of instruction given by our institutions.** In the first place it is the mission of our institutions of learning to qualify our young people for the practical duties of life. It is much to be preferred that they emphasize the industrial and practical side of education. Students are very apt to draw the conclusion that whichever side of a controversial question they adopt is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; and **it is very doubtful therefore, whether the great mass of our students have sufficient discriminating judgment to understand very much about some of the advanced theories of philosophy or science.** Some subjects are in themselves, perhaps, perfectly harmless, and any amount of discussion over them would not be injurious to the faith of our young people. We are told, for example, that the theory of gravitation is at best a hypothesis and that such is the atomic theory. These theories help to explain certain things about nature. Whether they are ultimately true can not make much difference to the religious convictions of our young people. **On the other hand there are speculations which touch the origin of life and the relationship of God to his children.** In a very limited degree that relationship has been defined by revelation, and until we receive more light upon the subject we deem it best to refrain from the discussion of certain philosophical theories which rather destroy than build up the faith of our young people. One thing about this so-called philosophy of religion that is very undesirable, lies in the fact that as soon as we convert our religion into a system of philosophy none but philosophers can understand, appreciate, or enjoy it. God, in his revelation to man has made His word so simple that the humblest of men without especial training, may enjoy great faith, comprehend the teachings of the Gospel, and enjoy undisturbed their religious convictions. For that reason we are averse to the discussion of certain philosophical theories in our religious instructions. If our Church schools would confine their so-called course of study in

biology to that knowledge of the insect world which would help us to eradicate the pests that threaten the destruction of our crops and our fruit, such instruction would answer much better the aims of the Church school, than **theories which deal with the origin of life. These theories may have a fascination for our teachers and they may find interest in the study of them, but they are not properly within the scope of the purpose for which these schools were organized.** Some of our teachers are anxious to explain how much of the theory of evolution, in their judgment, is true, and what is false, but that only leaves their students in an unsettled frame of mind. **They are not old enough and learned enough to discriminate, or put proper limitations upon a theory which we believe is more or less a fallacy.** In reaching the conclusion that evolution would be best left out of discussions **in our Church schools** we are deciding a question of **propriety** and are not undertaking to say how much of evolution is true, or how much is false. We think that while **it is a hypothesis, on both sides of which the most eminent scientific men of the world are arrayed,** that it is folly to take up its discussion in our institutions of learning; and **we can not see wherein such discussions are likely to promote the faith** of our young people. **On the other hand we have abundant evidence that many of those who have adopted in its fullness the theory of evolution have discarded the Bible, or at least refused to accept it as the inspired word of God.** It is not, then, the question of the liberty of any teacher to entertain whatever views he may have upon this hypothesis of evolution, but rather the right of the Church to say that it does **not think it profitable or wise to introduce controversies relative to evolution in its schools. Even if it were harmless** from the standpoint of our faith, we think there are things more important to the daily affairs of life and the practical welfare of our young people. The Church itself has no philosophy about the *modus operandi* employed by the Lord in His creation of the world, and much of the talk therefore, about the philosophy of Mormonism is altogether misleading. God has revealed to us a simple and effectual way of serving Him, and we should regret very much to see the simplicity of those revelations involved in all sorts of philosophical speculations. If we encouraged them it would not be long before we should have a theological scholastic aristocracy in the Church, and we should therefore not enjoy the brotherhood that now is, or should be common to rich and poor, learned and unlearned among the Saints.” (Joseph F. Smith, *The Juvenile Instructor* 46:4 (April 1911) :208-209.)

Notice how the substance of this message isn't to say, 'we don't know if evolution is true,' rather the substance of the message is to say, '**we don't like evolution, and bringing it up in church schools usually causes problems.**' He points out how **most who fully adopt evolution stop believing in the Bible.** Notice how he did say that **evolution is one of those parts of science that does in fact have to do with our spiritual wellbeing!** While it likely isn't wise to bring this subject up all the time in church classes, it is within the ability and duty of every saint to be informed on this matter and preach the truths on this subject in their homes and to those who are interested.

2. The Organic Evolution page refers to the New Era magazine's nameless statement, which (as I demonstrate in the "Issues with the 'No Official Church Position on Evolution' Claim" section of this book) isn't an official stance of the church, and actually links to the Origin of Man First Presidency statement, which is the official position of the church, and is clearly against evolution.

Remember President Benson's warning: "Sometimes, from behind the pulpit, in our classrooms, in our council meetings, and **in our Church publications,** we hear, read, or witness things that do **not square with the truth.**" (Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson, p. 134)



3. The Organic Evolution page claims that the 1909 1st Presidency statement made an official statement on the origin of man, but not on evolution. Those are the same thing - the whole point of evolution is to explain the origin of man, and the whole point of the 1909 statement was to take a stand against evolution! See my quotation and analysis of the 1909 statement for a closer look at the obvious implications of that statement.

4. The Organic Evolution page refers to the 1925 1st Presidency statement on evolution using the word ‘evolution’ in a positive light when it refers to ‘evolving into a god.’ When I read this argument, I was frankly aghast. The word evolution in this statement is clearly talking about going forward into godhood, not about coming from slime to get to where we are now. The word evolving has several meanings, and just because it was used to suggest progression into godhood doesn’t mean it can be subverted to indicate the authenticity and acceptability of organic evolution! I treated this statement in more detail in the ‘First Presidency Statement’ section of this book previously.

5. The Organic Evolution page speaks of Talmage and Widstoe who “regarded scientific discovery of truth as evidence of God’s use of natural laws,” then refers to Joseph Fielding Smith saying he “believed that the Biblical account of the Creation did not allow for the long spans required for species to multiply through evolution.” This description makes it sound like Fielding was anti-science, but anyone who has read his book *Man: His Origin & Destiny* knows better. Fielding was well versed in science, adored inspired scientists, and recognized just as well as anyone that science gives evidence of God’s laws.

6. The Organic Evolution page sites Heber J. Grant’s teaching to “[leave Geology, Biology, Archaeology and Anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, to scientific research, while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church.](#)” This wasn’t published to church members, and isn’t in alignment with related teachings demonstrating evolutionary theory’s implications. It was made regarding B.H. Roberts’ theory about people living on earth before the fall of Adam. More is said on this quote elsewhere in this book.

7. The Organic Evolution page refers to the ‘Encyclopedia of Mormonism’ entry on evolution (<https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Evolution>) which states, “*The scriptures tell why man was created, but they do not tell how.*” It also attempts to explain, erroneously, why the private 1931 First Presidency statement was given.

This is misleading on several levels. Gary Shapiro’s essay on this encyclopedia entry demonstrates many of these issues (read it here: <http://ndbf.blogspot.com/2005/06/encyclopedia-of-mormonismevolution.html>).

First, the encyclopedia was written by William E. Evenson, it isn’t an official church publication, and isn’t anything near an official 1st Presidency statement declaring the church’s position.

Next, to explain the private 1931 statement of leaving science to the scientists, the Encyclopedia entry says, “In 1931, when there was intense discussion on the issue of organic evolution.” What was this about? Actually, this was about B.H. Roberts’ book “The Truth The Way The Life,” and the controversial point was not about organic evolution, Roberts didn’t espouse such a view, but the controversial thing was that Roberts claimed that there was a creation of animals and beings placed on Earth before Adam, which died in a cataclysmic event. The Brethren didn’t want this message going around because it doesn’t match scripture and would confuse people, and this was the controversy. There was no disagreement on the issue of organic evolution. Roberts was not an evolutionist, and his book didn’t promote evolution. As evidenced by quotations in this volume, he believed that man did not evolve from a common lower lifeform. There was no disagreement between Roberts and the brethren regarding evolution.

Richard Sherlock, professor of philosophy at USU, says the theory of Roberts’ book "was clearly *not* a theory of evolution [because] it did *not* deal at all with the central thesis of evolution—the mutability of species and descent with modification.... He [Roberts] was *unwilling* to attempt a reconciliation grounded in a firm commitment to evolution." (*The Search For Harmony*, pp. 76-77)

The controversy was about whether death occurred before Adam, which point is contrary to scripture. Death before the fall certainly could be related to evolution. The 1st Presidency in 1909 had already declared that Adam was first man, which makes death before Adam impossible. The doctrine of the fall, that all life, plant animal and human, only experienced death and mortality (as opposed to immortality) after the fall of Adam. Later in this book I will relate several teachings of the prophet demonstrating this scriptural doctrine. In short. **2 Ne. 2:22** says that ALL things would remain in the state they were created in were it not for the Fall of Adam.

8. In general, the whole Organic Evolution page reads like a progressive revisionist essay, dodging and downplaying our true history regarding organic evolution left and right. It said little to nothing about the wealth of knowledge that has been revealed in this dispensation about the nature of the Earth and the creation through scriptures, nor did it bring up anything from the plethora of modern prophetic teachings about the same.

