



Richard Dawkins
Foundation
for Reason & Science

FREEDOM
FROM RELIGION
foundation

October 22, 2014

SENT VIA MAIL AND EMAIL TO: president@georgiasouthern.edu

Dr. Brooks A. Keel
President, Georgia Southern University
P.O. Box 8033
Statesboro, GA 30460-8033

Re: Constitutional concerns with professor proselytizing in classroom

Dear President Keel:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS) to urge you to investigate reports of a Georgia Southern University (GSU) professor proselytizing in the classroom. A concerned student contacted us. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 21,000 members, including more than 400 members in Georgia and an Atlanta chapter. We protect the constitutional separation between state and church. RDFRS ensures that science education and public policy remain secular and works to eliminate the stigma surrounding atheism and nonbelief.

It is our understanding that the GSU employs Prof. Emerson T. McMullen to teach history, including classes in the honors program, such as World History 1112. However, it is our information and understanding that McMullen uses class time to proselytize students and advance his personal religion, Christianity. We lay out the reported problems and the legal implications of those problems in two separate sections below.

We understand that as a historian, particularly a historian with a focus on science, McMullen could legitimately discuss the development of scientific ideas. He could even legitimately discuss religious doctrines masquerading as science, such as young earth creationism and intelligent design. However, it appears that McMullen does not present these as religious ideas lacking scientific merit. Instead, McMullen presents these religious beliefs as scientific fact. In short, McMullen appears to use at least some of his class to preach religion instead of teach history. We ask that you thoroughly investigate these allegations and require McMullen to stop preaching to his students.

We fully understand and support the need for academic freedom and free inquiry, particularly in universities. But McMullen is crossing ethical and constitutional lines.

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PROBLEMS REPORTED REGARDING McMULLEN'S PREACHING

Our reports and information indicate that McMullen (1) is known for injecting religion into his classes, (2) gives extra credit to students willing to endure and describe additional proselytizing, and (3) uses his position at a public university to promote religious beliefs like creationism, while undermining legitimate sciences, like biology. This is only what has been reported to us. We believe this is a part of a larger problem and are confident your investigation will reveal the extent of that problem

First, student reviews of McMullen's performance include testimonials about his inability to keep his religion to himself:¹

- "...he tried to push his outdated views onto the class ... He is very conservative and doesn't believe in climate change or evolution..."
- "Do the extra credit whether or not you are Christian though (*most of it is trying to convert you...* but hey, free points!)" (emphasis added)
- "He spends A LOT of time talking about Darwinism, he's a huge religious nut. Extra credit is to write a paper summing [up] his views on religion."

Second, McMullen grants extra credit to students who are receptive to his preaching and/or willing to undergo further attempts to convert them. As the reviews indicate McMullen's sermons are extensive enough that **he grants extra credit to students who write about his personal religious beliefs**. McMullen uses enough class time to discuss his personal religion that students can write full essays about it.

We understand that last semester he offered extra credit to go see the movie *God's Not Dead*—an argument for converting to Christianity and loathing atheists in movie form.²

Third, in his history class, McMullen hawks religious misinformation about evolution. Our complainant reports that he lectured for more than a week about "how evolution could not have happened." During these sermons, McMullen contradicted what students learn in their actual science classes. For instance, last semester, McMullen gave his students exam study guides that list potential essay questions and the answers he expects. The model answers illustrate McMullen's religious bias:

Essay Question #9: What is Louis Pasteur (1822-1895) known for?

1) Louis Pasteur, in his old age, was one of the most famous men of his time, and rightfully so. 7) Coupled with skillful experiment, he showed as conclusively as possible that life did not come from non-life. 8) Thus, there is no such thing as spontaneous generation. 9) Although some "scientists" today claim that life originated from non-life, this does not explain the origin of our genetic information. Science shows that earth, air, water and other materials have no genetic information.³ 10) Pasteur

¹ Reviews from RateMyProfessor.com. Screenshots appended to this letter.

² For more information on the anti-atheist bias of this movie please see <http://bit.ly/1vN8cTz>. For a more in-depth analysis, see philosophy professor Daniel Fincke's analyses: <http://bit.ly/1yhr01D> and <http://bit.ly/1oEcD2z>.

³ Points 8) and 9) are not historical statements, but McMullen's personal conclusions that conflict with scientific realities.

correctly stated that the great principle of biology is that life comes from life. (Emphasis added).

Essay Question #11: Discuss the pros and cons of Darwin’s idea of *evolution* (descent, by modification and natural selection, from a common ancestor to man, complex species)

Pros: It was appealing at a time of great progress. It appeared scientific. Darwin was upper class in a class-conscious society. Some like its naturalism.

Cons: Darwin had no proof of evolution, only of *adaptation* (basically, change within a being’s genetic code). There was (and is) no solid evidence for descent from a common ancestor, and for the multitude of predicted transitional forms from one species to another. There was (and is) evidence that the earliest animals (like the trilobites) were complex, not simple. (The eye of the trilobite was fully adapted right at the start.) There was (and is) evidence that the earliest animals were very diverse. Darwin’s idea went against the fact that genetic information degrades from generation to generation, which explains why we see extinction today and not evolution. The implications of evolution’s naturalism also undercut Judeo-Christian morality, replacing it with notions like “might makes right” and that the “unfit” do not deserve to survive. This laid the foundation for eugenics, which led to sterilization for the “unfit” in the US.

The sheer weight—two lines of pros compared to eleven lines of cons—dedicated to undermining the one theory necessary to understand biology is bad enough. But we had an expert look over these claims; they are simply wrong.

Dr. Jerry Coyne,⁴ evolutionary biologist, examined the reports, evidence, and some publications by McMullen: “virtually everything [McMullen] says about evolution is *dead wrong*. He’s teaching lies to students and pushing a religious viewpoint.” Dr. Coyne broke down the above exam answers. For Essay Question #9, Dr. Coyne wrote:

The problems are in 7-10. Pasteur’s experiment showed that in sterilized flasks of broth into which no organisms could enter from the air, no living creatures were seen after several weeks of observation. In contrast, if the flasks were open to the air, bacteria colonized the flask. He concluded that, *over this short time period*, complex life (for bacteria are complex) does not originate spontaneously from non-life.

But this experiment says nothing about the first origin of life around 4 billion years ago, which undoubtedly required thousands or hundreds of thousands of years. To go from a group of chemicals in an early Earth environment to an organism even as “simple” as a bacterium, one requires the evolution of both a genetic code and a protein-synthesizing mechanism: things that would have originated through a long and tortuous process of both chemical and biological selection. To think that this could have happened in a few weeks is absurd, and no biologist believes that. Further, that kind of origin could not happen on the present-day Earth, since existing organisms would ingest the newly-arising ones that of course have evolved no means of defense. In fact, virtually all biologists agree that life did originate from non-life on the early Earth. The statement that “all life

⁴ Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago and a member of both the Committee on Genetics and the Committee on Evolutionary Biology. B.S. in Biology. College of William and Mary; Ph.D. in evolutionary biology, Harvard University; Postdoctoral fellowship in Timothy Prout’s laboratory at The University of California at Davis.

comes from life” is not a principle held by modern biologists. In fact, there is a spate of work in the field called “abiogenesis” trying to understand how life originated from non-living materials on the early Earth, and significant progress has been made.

In other words, Pasteur’s experiments are important, but McMullen is distorting their outcomes and significance to further his religious agenda. McMullen’s casual treatment of modern scientists can be seen in his use of scare quotes in point (9) “some ‘scientists’ today claim life originate from non-life...” McMullen is perverting both history and science to sell his religion to unsuspecting students.

Exam question #11 fares no better under scrutiny by qualified scientists:

- A. McMullen claims that “Darwin had no proof of evolution...” But Dr. Coyne notes that “the bulk of Darwin’s 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species*, actually comprises evidence for evolution. In fact, Darwin’s book convinced most scientists of the existence of evolution within a decade, but it took until the 1920s until natural selection, the engine of adaptation, was widely accepted.” As Dr. Coyne shows in his book *Why Evolution is True*, the evidence for evolution “is drawn from many areas: embryology, morphology, geology, biogeography, and so on.”
- B. McMullen claims that there “was (and is) no solid evidence for descent from a common ancestor...” Again, Dr. Coyne writes, “that is completely wrong. There is tons of evidence, from the fossil record, from molecules, from embryology, and from vestigial organs, that species share common ancestors. And there are so many transitional forms, with more being found every day (feathered “dino-birds” are a recent example), that you would have to be either completely ignorant or blinkered to say that there is no evidence for transitional forms.”
- C. McMullen argues that the “earliest animals (like the trilobites) were complex...” “Again, completely false,” writes Dr. Coyne. “The earliest traces of animal life are of only a few forms like worms and things that resemble jellyfish and polyps. More complex animal life does not appear until later: about 514 million years ago, roughly 40 million years *after* we have the simple life of the “small shelly fauna” and the “Ediacaran period.” There is nothing in the earliest fossil record nearly as complex as tetrapods (reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals).”
- D. McMullen also relies on the hackneyed argument that “Darwin’s idea went against the fact that genetic information degrades from generation to generation, which explains why we see extinction today and not evolution.” But, “Wrong again” notes Dr. Coyne, “there are over 300 cases of evolution documented in real time. Further, the notion that genetic information only degrades and doesn’t improve via evolution is absolutely wrong. We have many cases of genetic information increasing and not degrading. One example is the duplication of existing genes and then their diversification into different forms, like the genes that make alpha- beta- and gamma-hemoglobins, each of which does a different thing and all of which descend from a single ancestral gene. That is one example of an increase in genetic information, and there are many, many more.”

Arguably McMullen’s most egregious error is claiming that “evolution’s naturalism also undercut undercut Judeo-Christian morality⁵... [t]his laid the foundation for eugenics...” This bait and switch, meant to scare students away from legitimate investigations into the

⁵ “Judeo-Christian morality” is a revealing phrase. Evolution has nothing to say about morality, only about how species evolve. It does under the Judeo-Christian scriptural account of creation. The implicit claim that Judeo-Christianity has a monopoly on morality is clearly religious and also problematic.

truth of a scientific theory, is beneath the reputation of GSU. In any event, “eugenics does not come from Darwinism, but from the idea that one can breed plants and animals via artificial selection. Artificial selection has been practiced for 10,000 years and long antedated Darwin. Even if Darwinism did inspire eugenics—it did not—the misuse of a scientific theory is not evidence that the theory is wrong. After all, chemistry was the source of poison gas used in World War I, and physics the source of the atomic bomb. Are we going to criticize those disciplines because they were co-opted in the service of ideologies that were often harmful?” Coyne writes. No doubt GSU’s biology department will back up Dr. Coyne if asked to review this letter.

McMULLEN’S BEHAVIOR PRESENTS SERIOUS LEGAL ISSUES FOR GSU

McMullen not only lowers the reputation and standards of this university, but has created serious constitutional problems. As a public university, GSU is subject to the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which separates state and church.

There is a significant difference between teaching religion and preaching religion. The former is an objective investigation into religion, and “it might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion ...” *Abington Tshp. Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 US 203, 225 (1963). The latter is a biased presentation about the “truth” of a particular religion and its beliefs.

Creationism cannot be taught as scientific fact in public schools. *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, (1987). Yet McMullen, who is not a biologist, undermines evolutionary theory and teaches creationism, an undeniably religious belief. The most recent case to address teaching creationism, intelligent design, or any of the other misnamed creationist ilk as scientific fact in a public institution is *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area Sch. Dist.*, 400 F.Supp. 2d 707 (M.D. Pa 2005). The court held that:

Creationism, intelligent design, and other claims of supernatural intervention in the origin of life or of species are not science because they are not testable by the methods of science. These claims subordinate observed data to statements based on authority, revelation, or religious belief. ... This contrasts with science, where any hypothesis or theory always remains subject to the possibility of rejection or modification in the light of new knowledge. *Id.* at 737.

McMullen’s active promotion of his other personal religious views is also problematic. The University of Alabama ordered a teacher, Dr. Bishop, to stop injecting religion into his classroom. Bishop lost a free-speech lawsuit challenging that order. *Bishop v. Aronov*, 926 F.2d 1066 (11th Cir. 1991). Bishop continually told his class that he believed:

God came to earth in the form of Jesus Christ and he has something to tell us about life which is crucial to success and happiness. Now this is simply my personal belief, understand, and I try to model my life after Christ, who was concerned with people, and I feel that is the wisest thing I can do. You need to recognize as my students that this is my bias and it colors everything I say and do.

If that is not your bias, that is fine. You need, however to, filter everything I say with that (Christian bias) filter. *Id.* at 1068.

The university's order requiring Bishop to stop such remarks was constitutional. It said:

Foremost, I want to reaffirm our commitment to your right of academic freedom and freedom of religious belief. This communication should not be construed as an attempt to interfere with or suppress your freedoms. From discourse with you and others, I feel that certain actions on your behalf are unwarranted at a public institution such as The University of Alabama and should cease. Among those actions that should be discontinued are: 1) the interjection of religious beliefs and/or preferences during instructional time periods and 2) the optional classes where a "Christian Perspective" of an academic topic is delivered. *Id.* at 1069.

The court specifically held that the university classroom is "not an open forum" and upheld the university's order that the professor "separate his personal and professional beliefs and that he not impart the former to his students during 'instructional time' or under the guise of the courses he teaches in so-called optional classes." *Id.* at 1071. The court was "not persuaded that, even in the remotest sense, Dr. Bishop's rights of free exercise or worship ... are implicated." *Id.* at 1077.

Finally, McMullen's behavior raises serious ethical issues for GSU. Students would understandably think that their grade might be in jeopardy for giving an answer that relies on scientific evidence and not McMullen's religion.

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY'S REPUTATION IS AT STAKE

Legal issues aside, McMullen's preaching threatens the integrity of a GSU degree. GSU gives students honors history credit for listening to a professor preaching religion. McMullen is undermining the genuine scholarship of GSU's science departments.

We request that GSU thoroughly investigate all McMullen's classes and his teaching/preaching methods. If your investigation bears out these allegations, we ask that you take appropriate corrective action, including ordering McMullen to cease and desist. McMullen ought to be instructed to "separate his personal and professional beliefs and that he not impart the former to his students during 'instructional time' or under the guise of the courses he teaches in so-called optional classes." *Bishop*, 926 F.2d at 1071.

May we hear from you at your earliest convenience as to what steps GSU is taking to correct this constitutional violation and breach of its trust to offer quality education?

Sincerely,



Dan Barker & Annie Laurie Gaylor
FFRF Co-Presidents

DB ALG: Andrew L. Seidel












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<p>12/28/2013</p> <p> GOOD</p> <p>3 HELPFULNESS</p> <p>4 CLARITY</p> <p>3 EASINESS</p>	<p>HIST 1112</p> <p>Taken for Credit: N/A Attendance: N/A</p> <p>Textbook Use: It's a must have Rater Interest: Sorta interested Grade Received: N/A</p> <p>Smart professor with a plethora of knowledge about history. One thing I didn't like is that he tries to push his outdated views onto the class randomly. He is very conservative and doesn't believe in climate change or evolution, which is just dumb imho. Other than that I respect Dr. McMullen and enjoyed his class. Make sure to read the textbook.</p> <p> 0 people found this useful  0 people did not find this useful</p> <p>report this rating</p>
<p>05/31/2013</p> <p> GOOD</p> <p>5 HELPFULNESS</p> <p>5 CLARITY</p> <p>5 EASINESS</p>	<p>1112</p> <p>Taken for Credit: N/A Attendance: N/A</p> <p>Textbook Use: Essential to passing Rater Interest: It's my life Grade Received: N/A</p> <p>Excellent Professor. Do the extra credit whether or not you are Christian though (most of it is trying to convert you...but hey free points!), it will come in handy. Make sure that you go to class as well for the extra points.</p> <p> 0 people found this useful  0 people did not find this useful</p> <p>report this rating</p>
<p>05/13/2009</p> <p> AVERAGE</p> <p>3 HELPFULNESS</p> <p>2 CLARITY</p> <p>1 EASINESS</p>	<p>HIST1112</p> <p>Taken for Credit: N/A Attendance: N/A</p> <p>Textbook Use: It's a must have Rater Interest: Meh Grade Received: N/A</p> <p>I do not know where to begin, McMullen is way past his prime. He doesn't cover the material in class that he tests on. Just shows a ton of pictures, with nothing work noting. He spends A LOT of time talking about Darwinism, he's a huge religious nut. Extra credit is to write a paper summing his views on religion. Curves his test 25%.</p> <p> 0 people found this useful  0 people did not find this useful</p> <p>report this rating</p>