



# More than Theology

## An Analysis of Anti-Evolution Denominations during the Early 20th Century

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### Introduction

Since the publication of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin in 1859, theologians and scientists began their passionate debate on the creation of the universe. Fundamentalists, who interpret the Holy Bible literally, believe that God created Earth and mankind as in the Book of Genesis. On the other hand, those who believe in the theory of evolution challenge both the authenticity of religious texts and the legitimacy of religious authorities.

Much of this story is well-known, but it remains unclear why America proves to be fertile ground for anti-evolution theories and why anti-evolution legislation and litigation did not start until the 1920s—more than a half century after the initial debate on evolution. Previous studies on the subject date back to World War I, when anti-evolution theories gained relevance (S. Trollinger and W. Trollinger 2016, 4). Many have also identified important political and institutional actors like Williams Jennings Bryan, a three-time presidential nominee, the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA), and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (Magat 2006, 541; Larson 1998, 69-71). While extant studies provided a larger context of the political, social, and institutional background that fostered anti-evolution theories, they failed to explain why three of twenty-eight major American religious groups (namely Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, Southern Baptist Convention, and Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) actively opposed evolution theory, while others supported or remained silent about it (Wilde 2020, 50-51). Current research does not explain the discrepancies of religious viewpoints on evolution. This project is an attempt to fill the gap.

### Methods and Materials

I used a combination of primary and secondary sources for this project. An initial examination of more than 10,000 articles from periodicals of 25 of America's most prominent religious groups that represented approximately 76 percent of all Americans in 1935 was conducted. I identified Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Norwegian Lutheran Church, and Southern Baptist Convention as the only three out of the twenty five denominations that were opposed to the theory of evolution. I then conducted a systematic review of existing literature on these denominations.

Denominational periodicals were obtained through the Interlibrary Loan Service available through Penn libraries. Professor Wilde is also generous enough to share her data with me.

### Results

This paper examines anti-evolutionism in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, and the Southern Baptist Convention, three major denominations that actively opposed theories of evolution circa 1920 in the United States of America. Although extensive research has focused on the fundamentalist/modernist debate, very few have explained why some denominations criticized evolution while others supported or remained silent. This paper explores the theological, political, and economic background that gave rise to denominational anti-evolutionism in the 1920s through examining extant literature and denominational periodicals. The findings suggest that while the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod opposed evolution for theological reasons, the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America criticized evolution with nationalistic intents and the Southern Baptist Convention did so for its fundraising campaign.

### Future Directions

I plan to further develop this project by singling out Norwegian Lutheran Church's anti-evolutionism and discuss such a sentiment in the context of white nationalism and with relations to the Klu Klux Klan. I wish to incorporate the two collections of Ku Klux Klan materials at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts and demonstrate a historical positive correlation between anti-evolutionism and Christian nationalism.

### References

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