

# Scientific literacy

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Five different bills have popped up in four different states designed to challenge the teaching of evolutionary biology and global climate change. These bills display similar language, which suggests a common source. Indeed, behind each is the work of the Discovery Institute and its “Teach the Controversy” campaign, which seeks to discredit the teaching of evolution and calls on public schools to teach creationism and intelligent design along with evolution.

Such legislative proposals are peculiar to American religious culture. When British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright visited with *Century* editors last fall, he noted that even conservative evangelicals in his country don’t dispute the teaching of evolution.

Why does the antiscience sentiment gain such traction in America? It can partly be attributed to the resurgent conservative movement of recent decades, which ties the distinctive theological concerns of conservative Christians to wider political suspicions about government funding and elite discourse. New Atheist writers like Richard Dawkins, who claim to present the scientific point of view, exacerbate the apparent conflict between science and faith with their aggressive attacks on faith and the faithful.

The scientific community perhaps should accept some blame for the breadth of the antiscientific spirit. As Shawn Lawrence Otto has argued in the *Scientific American*, most scientists write papers for fellow scientists and eschew public conversation and

controversy. They need to do a better job of explaining their work and its salience for human flourishing. As state and federal money for scientific research dries up, scientists may need to embrace this task simply out of self-interest.

Scientists in academia could follow the example of their colleagues in the history department, who often are sharply attuned to the interests of a wider public and are able to write for a wide audience.

A rare conversation between scientists, theologians and social scientists is featured in [“Adaptive faith.”](#) The participants are all unusually committed to listening to one another and exploring points of connection and cooperation, as well as difference, between religion and science.

In addition to needing more interdisciplinary conversations of this kind, we need more figures who are able to transmit the new developments in science and religion to the person in the street—and in the pew. If, as religious believers contend, all truth comes from God, then religious people need not fear scientific research. They should welcome the conversation.