SCIENCE VS. BELIEFS ON CLIMATE, CREATIONISM

Throughout the world, the forces of religious fundamentalism are challenging the forces of secular democracy. In the Middle East, the conflict boils into civil war. In the United States, the conflict merely simmers beneath recent Supreme Court rulings involving abortion and contraception making headline news.

Consider the latest Gallup poll on evolution, released on June 1. Astonishingly, 42 percent of Americans remain creationists, believing that "God created humans in their present form 10,000 years ago. This view has changed little over the past three decades, underscoring "the ongoing discontinuity between the beliefs that many Americans hold and the general scientific consensus on this important issue," according to Gallup.

The key word is "discontinuity." On one side are those following deeply held personal convictions based on biblical accounts. On the other side are multiple lines of unimpeachable scientific evidence from geology, paleontology, archaeology, biodiversity, psychology, genomics and laboratory experimentation. The battle between faith and reason is never ending.

So who holds creationist views? Those who attend religious services weekly are three times more likely to accept the creationist position than those who never or rarely attend services. Those with college degrees are half as likely to believe this way as those whose education stopped at high school. And those who are 65 years or older are nearly twice as likely to be creationists.

These three variables -- religiousness, education and age -- are strongly cross-correlated. They cluster as a package, a cultural norm that I was born into, which has persisted practically unchanged for 32 years and which will likely persist until it dies away.

Contrasting with the stability of the creationist viewpoint over the last 32 years is a creeping rise in the percentage who accept that evolution occurred without God's guidance. This percentage rose from 9 percent to 19 percent since 1982, mirroring the decline from 38 percent to 31 percent of those who accept a third position: that God guided evolution through geological time.

A Gallup poll on climate change released April 22 found a similar persistent "discontinuity" between die-hard believers and the scientific consensus. Two large and consolidated groups of Americans hold polar opposite views. "Concerned believers," including me, accept that carbon pollution is a major player, anticipate serious impacts to our lives and believe that the media underreports the issue. "Cool skeptics" interpret recent climate change as natural, disagree that their lives will be seriously impacted and believe the media exaggerates the issue. Though the mainstream media aligns with the consensus, and though politicians are backing away from positions denying anthropogenic climate change, the hearts of the people apparently do not.

Although rarely discussed, there is a strong and logical link between creationist and "cool-skeptical" viewpoints. If one believes that God created Earth to provide a home for his likeness no more than 10,000 years ago, then it logically follows that he is still taking care of us, and will prevent us from making too much trouble. Here, the assumed control is comfortably from the top down.

If one believes, however, that everything on earth is a bottom up consequence of geological history and evolution -- including the accidental emergence of humans from apes -- then it's far easier to see how the actions of one species could change the planet, and that our species must remain on guard for potential consequences.
Many of Gallup's cool skeptics are either skeptical by nature or are mercenaries for the fossil fuel industry. The vast majority are likely responding to deeply held personal convictions that align with traditional religious views. In support of this contention, the National Center for Science Education (which has fought long and hard against those opposed to teaching evolution) recently extended its portfolio to fight those opposed to teaching climate change science in public schools.

I'm totally OK with people being guided by deeply held religious convictions. I'm not OK when such convictions worm their way into our nation's system of laws, classrooms, medical clinics and, worst of all, military forces. Thank God for the constitutional separation of church and state.