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A FEW GOD MEN

PHILLIP E. JOHNSON WENT TO HARVARD, OPPOSED THE VIETNAM WAR, AND TAUGHT AT BERKELEY. BUT, ALONG WITH TWO COLLEGE PEERS, JOHNSON HAS ALSO DEVOTED HIS LIFE TO PROMOTING INTELLIGENT DESIGN. THE TRUE STORY OF THREE FORMER LIBERALS AND THEIR FIGHT TO PUT GOD BACK IN OUR SCHOOLS.

BY GLYN VINCENT



Photograph by Olivier Laude

I WAS IN A CONVERSATION WITH THE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN, PHILLIP EVERETT JOHNSON, THE FATHER OF INTELLIGENT DESIGN, AND HE DIDN'T WANT TO LET ME OFF THE HOOK. "I HAVE A THOUGHT IN MY HEAD THAT YOU MAY BE A CATHOLIC," HE SAID TO ME TWO HOURS IN. "I WAS BROUGHT UP A CATHOLIC," I REPLIED. HE WAITED FOR FURTHER EXPLANATION. I AM NOW A DEIST, I TOLD HIM, WITH EASTERN LEANINGS. "WELL ..." HE PAUSED TO THINK

about that. "Glad to hear it," he said. "I believe in going along with anybody as far as we can go together."

We'd gone far enough, I thought. I hadn't called up Johnson to be converted but to find how *he* had converted. Johnson is not your stereotypical evangelical. He is a soft-spoken man of 66 with the old-fashioned demeanor of a small-town pharmacist. He was a liberal Democrat as an undergraduate at Harvard from 1957 to 1961: first in his class at University of Chicago Law School and then clerk for Earl Warren, the most liberal Chief Justice in U.S. Supreme Court history; he opposed the Vietnam War and later became associate dean of the School of Law at the University of California at Berkeley.

In his late thirties, Johnson, who had not previously been religious, became a Christian. In 1991, at the age of 50, he published *Darwin on Trial*—which would become the most influential book in the intelligent design movement. Soon afterward, he formulated a plan called the "wedge" to undermine natural science and put intelligent design—essentially the view that the universe was created by a divine being—on an equal footing with Darwin's theory of evolution. But it wasn't just Darwin that Johnson condemned but the godless cultural legacy of Marxist materialism and Freudian psychology, a driving force, Johnson and his Christian activist brethren believe, in the erosion of our moral values. In his campaign, Johnson enlisted the aid of two men he'd been to school with at Harvard. The three were steeped in the liberal politics of the mid-sixties, but would go on to become unexpected leaders in the fight to promote economic and religious conservatism in the 1990s and beyond.

In December 2005, a federal court in Pennsylvania ruled in *Kitzmiller vs. Dover Area School District* that the instruction of evolution in public schools did not require a creationist caveat. Yet the intelligent design movement has retained its vigor. Numerous polls show that over 50 percent of Americans believe in strict creationism—that God created the world in six days; another 30 percent in the idea that evolution was guided by God. Pro-creationist Christian parents on school boards have challenged the accuracy of science text books, from Georgia to Kansas to, more recently, the suburbs of Los Angeles. This May, in a televised debate among Republican presidential candidates, three contenders raised their hands to indicate that they did not believe in evolution, worsening the growing fracas about the issue among conservatives themselves. The best-selling status of "atheist" books such as Richard Dawkins' *The God*

Delusion and Sam Harris' *Letter to A Christian Nation* further raises the stakes of the argument. "I'm thrilled ... they call religion, belief in God, not only absurd, but evil. They have really opened up things before the public," Johnson told me from his home in Berkeley, Calif., where he has taught and lived for the past 40 years.

Johnson's family back in Aurora, Ill. was not particularly devout. When he was a child, his mother used to take him to church on Sundays while his father played golf. But Johnson, who was considered the smartest student in his high school, says he wasn't interested in Christian doctrine. One day in 1956 while sitting in the back seat of his parents' Chrysler, he pondered a life-altering move. Thumbing through a Harvard catalog, he decided, at age 16, to apply for early acceptance. "I couldn't grow up fast enough," he said. Johnson found life in Aurora intellectually "stifling" and couldn't wait to get out. In September of 1957, he and his father, a prominent accountant, drove to Chicago and boarded a plane for Boston. "I thought of Harvard as a kind of paradise of brilliant people and lovely surroundings," he said.

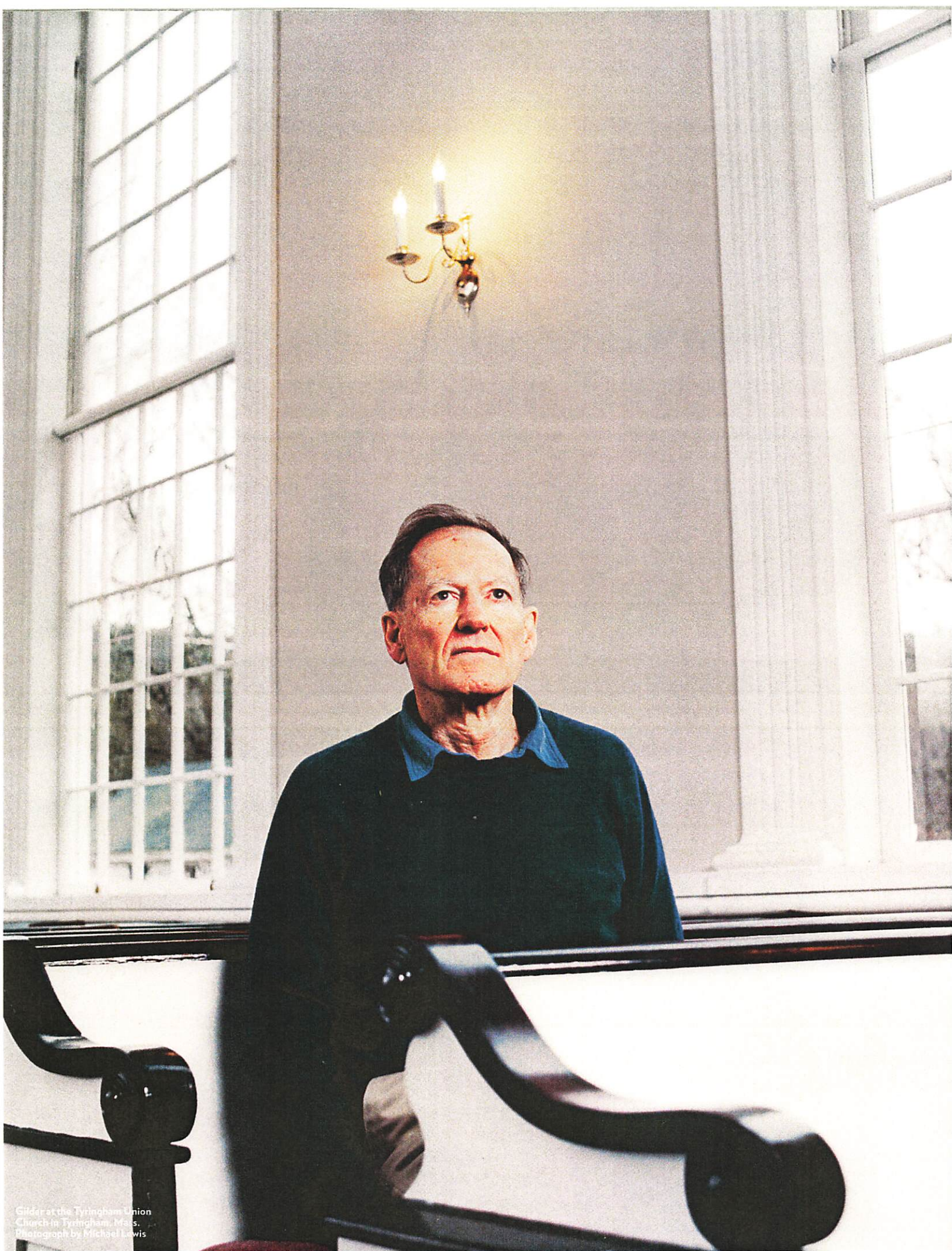
Some observers might find it surprising that Harvard could have served as an incubator, albeit inadvertently, of conservative Christian thought. Harvard is an institution that fosters intellectual life, and intelligent design is widely seen as an anti-intellectual movement. Moreover, certainly since the Kennedy administration, Harvard has been widely perceived as a liberal secular institution, resisting, if not hostile to, the resurgence of conservative, fundamentalist thought.

It was not always so. Harvard, after all, was named after a Puritan minister. Louis Agassiz, the great 19th century Harvard naturalist, planned a trip to the Galapagos to *disprove* Darwin's theory of evolution. Nor was it always liberal politically. In the midst of the Depression, the Harvard community consistently supported conservative Republicans against **FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT**, backing Herbert Hoover in 1932, Alfred Landon in 1936, and Wendell Willkie in 1940. All that changed with the announcement that **JOHN F. KENNEDY**, a Massachusetts Democrat, was running for President.

"We were all Kennedy liberals," Johnson said. "Because he was our kind. He reminded us of ourselves ... only better. He had this magnetic personality and appearance. Whereas Nixon seemed like an old used car dealer."

RICHARD STEVENSON, one of Johnson's Harvard roommates and now an English professor at the University of Oregon, says that he remembers Johnson as being particularly bright and opinionated, but not necessarily political. Johnson had a great passion for music, Stevenson says. He was a devoted opera fan, and manager of the Harvard University Band for a year. Johnson says he was just "drifting along" doing whatever came easily—which occasionally meant hanging with the band members, smoking, drinking, and playing poker. He emphasizes his immaturity and gullibility at the time, his mindless embrace of liberal attitudes. At Harvard, he says, one got the idea that smart people were liberals and conservatives were dumb.

Johnson did not start the intelligent design movement on his own. While he was still writing *Darwin on Trial*, he found a home for his neo-creationist ideas at the Discovery Institute, a conservative think tank in Seattle. The Discovery Institute was founded in 1990 by **BRUCE CHAPMAN**, a former Reagan official, with help and money from **GEORGE GILDER**, then a tech wiz on Wall Street and author of *Wealth and Poverty*, a neo-conservative bedside tome. Chapman and Gilder, it turns out, went to Harvard too. They were roommates and both graduated in 1962—secular liberals who once aggressively supported civil rights and intellectual



Gilder at the Tyngbam Union
Church in Tyngbam, Mass.
Photograph by Michael Lewis

freedom—and, though they didn't know it at the time, were just one year behind Johnson at Harvard. They, too, emerged from the permissive, "anti-patriotic" cultural mayhem of the '60s and '70s as converts, not just to neocon politics and economics but also, like Johnson, to conservative Christianity.

Johnson and Chapman met in the early 1990s when Johnson spoke at a Discovery Institute conference on C.S. Lewis and "The Death of Materialism." Johnson had been invited by the Institute's vice president, Stephen C. Meyer, then a professor of philosophy who had befriended Johnson in England and become interested in his critique. Johnson soon became an advisor to the Institute and a coterie of renegade, anti-evolution scientists and philosophers disaffected with materialism began to assemble around him and Meyer. "We were looking for a place [and] an operation to make it possible to do work and write," Johnson told me. "We couldn't do it in the mainstream academic magazines because of political correctness."

IN 1993, THE GROUP HELD A RETREAT IN THE CALIFORNIA TOWN OF PAJARO Dunes where they were joined by the conservative California philanthropist Howard Ahmanson (the details of this meeting are told in Edward Humes' recent book, *Monkey Girl*). The principal speaker at the retreat was Michael Behe, whose theory of "irreducible complexity" was taking the anti-evolutionist camp by storm. Behe, a biochemistry professor at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, presented studies that, he said, proved that biochemical processes at the molecular level are too complex to be explained by random mutation and natural selection (one of the central ideas of his controversial book *Darwin's Black Box*). His premise excited the anti-materialists and Christians at the conference. If the basic chemical elements of genetic machinery cannot evolve on their own, that was proof, they surmised, that there must be a higher intelligence or a God guiding the process. Ahmanson offered to back the Discovery Institute's efforts to promote intelligent design. Armed with his money, Behe's anti-evolutionary "science" and Johnson's "wedge" strategy, the Discovery Institute came up with a plan to transform intelligent design from a hodge-podge of fringe ideas to a viable mainstream movement. Johnson's legal thinking was critical to the plan's success. "I thought of it like a political campaign or big case litigation," he said in an interview at Yale in 2000. "The question is 'How to win?'"

Johnson, who is not a six-day Biblical literalist, realized that anything associated with creationism was a liability. He was determined not to repeat William Jennings Bryan's mistake at the Scopes trial of including the Bible and Noah's Ark in the argument. Keep to the point, he intoned to his followers: "Do you need a Creator to do the creating or can nature do it on its own?" The word "God" was not to be used.

In 1996, the Discovery Institute decided to form the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture (they later dropped "the renewal of" from the name) to pursue an intelligent design campaign in earnest. Their goal, outlined in a leaked memo, was nothing less than to overthrow materialism's hold on contemporary thought and replace it with a theistic view of the universe. It might have seemed a far-fetched ambition for a small, unknown think tank in Washington State. But one year later, William F. Buckley, a good friend of Gilder's, featured intelligent design on his popular television program *Firing Line*. Soon school boards across the country were demanding that their schools "teach the controversy" about evolution. A near reenactment of the Scopes trial of 1925 was out of the starting gate.

Gilder and Chapman were far more involved in politics at Harvard than Johnson, and their time there served as an important prelude to their long and

varied careers in the political arena. "When I was in school the faculty and liberal students were infatuated with existentialism (Sartre, Camus, Brecht, etc.). Freud was king. Marx was considered the North Star. Anti-communism was in poor taste," Chapman wrote to me from Seattle, where he now lives. In Quincy House, where Chapman and Gilder were roommates, the students were politically inclined and the atmosphere, after 1960, was contentious. "The liberal left and the far right were both on the move," **TODD GITLIN**, author of *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* wrote in an e-mail. Some Harvard students joined a sit-in at a Woolworth's counter to protest segregation. Others attended Ban the Bomb rallies. Chapman and Gilder met at a Students for Nelson Rockefeller gathering in their sophomore year.

Gilder's godfather was **DAVID ROCKEFELLER**, who had roomed at Harvard with his father before he was killed in World War II when Gilder was three. Gilder went to Exeter where he wrote editorials against compulsory chapel for the school newspaper. His contrarian streak never left him and sparked controversy later in his career with his opinions on daycare, welfare, and feminism.

Chapman's father (who left his mother) was a pro-Castro one-time ACLU attorney who took his son to Popular Front rallies. At Harvard, Chapman and Gilder launched a political journal, *Advance*, for liberal Republicans. The magazine supported civil rights and took on reactionary, anti-intellectual Republicans like Barry Goldwater who supported an alliance between the Republican Party and Dixie Democrats. "We thought we were smart, smarter than these stupid old fogies like Senator Everett Dirksen ... these crude, doltish conservative Republicans in Washington," Gilder told me.

As for Johnson, he did vote for Kennedy at Harvard but, he says, never got more politically active at that time than wearing a button. He left Harvard a middle-of-the-road secularist and set off for Africa to teach English—not as an idealist, he's quick to point out, but with a sense of adventure. He returned to the U.S. sooner than anticipated when he learned that his mother had cancer. Johnson had previously resisted his father's wish that he become a lawyer, but now he gave in and attended the University of Chicago Law School. It turned out he had a natural gift for legal studies. After being a clerk for Earl Warren, Johnson faced a choice of teaching at Yale or at Berkeley, which was Warren's alma mater. Johnson found Yale too preppy and opted to join the faculty at Berkeley, where he taught criminal law. He arrived at the fiercely liberal university in 1967 as the student revolution was in full swing. Johnson at first found the political unrest "thrilling" and, he says, he was passionately against the Vietnam War. But Sanford Kadish, dean of Berkeley's law school from 1975 until 1982, told me that Johnson was suspicious of belonging to anything. "He was distrustful, deeply skeptical of movements. A doubter of reigning ideologies."

Within a decade, Johnson, who by all accounts has a brilliant legal mind, had received tenure and become associate dean of the school. But all was not well at home. His wife delved more deeply than he

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would have liked into what he called the “artistic politics” of the time. They did not agree on their family roles either. “I had a strong motivation to be a good provider, but my wife resented that I thought the child care was her job, her responsibility,” he told me. “He had a tough divorce,” says Kadish. “He was really shook up by that.”

ONE SPRING EVENING IN 1977, THE DAY AFTER HIS WIFE TOLD HIM SHE wanted to leave, Johnson accompanied his 11-year-old daughter to a Bible school event to which she had been invited. At the church, seeing the minister and the other parents united by their beliefs, Johnson had a realization. “I thought, there is something here that I like, that I want to have. I want to be like that.”

Johnson didn’t become a Christian overnight. It was a gradual process, he says, in which he debated whether Christian metaphysics were real or just something he wanted to believe. His move toward the church was coupled with his disillusionment with academia. He had left behind the student ferment on campus, and had also grown tired of the “outrageous behavior” of the Berkeley left. It was more than just the drugs and sexual promiscuity, he says: “When the left position turned from pacifism and liberalism into this racial identity politics, that was a big shock to me. Because then I, as a professor and a dean, became the enemy.”

Johnson spent more time at the First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, where he met his second wife, Kathie. He started to look for a meaningful topic of study with which to make a broader impact on society.

In 1987, while in London as a visiting professor, Johnson read Richard Dawkins’ *The Blind Watchmaker*. Ever since his conversion to Christianity, the theory of evolution had been a thorn in his side. If Darwinism was true, he reasoned, then Christian metaphysics was a fantasy. Johnson’s legal mind told him it had to be one way or the other. After a first reading he found Dawkins’ defense of Darwinism unassailable. “I had the impression that this was all a matter of proved fact. That ... the experiments had proved that we have no alternative, that this was how things were.” But Johnson was also reading Michael Denton’s book *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, which took aim at the so-called missing links in evolution theory. With Denton’s help, Johnson says he began to detect holes and suspect the rational premise of Darwinism. “I discovered that there was an arbitrary metaphysical starting point and that once I began to look at its basis I saw that it was much weaker than I had been led to believe.”

Johnson became convinced that the scientific evidence of evolution, “impartially viewed,” pointed in the general direction of an intelligent creator. Furthermore, he believed that the scientific community, in excluding any discussion of the “evidence” of divine or intelligent creation from the precincts of science, had in effect rigged the system and precluded any questioning of evolutionary theory. While in England he wrote down his thoughts, a brief, blueprint essence of his book *Darwin on Trial*, and gave it to Stephen Meyer, who passed it on to like-minded creationists in the States.

When Johnson returned to America in 1988, elements of the academic and scientific communities were busy debating the 1987 Supreme Court ruling against a Louisiana law that required creation science to be taught in the public schools. It was an important case for Johnson, because it reinforced his notion that the only way to get around the separation of the state and religion issue was, officially at least, to take Christianity out of the debate. Two years later, Johnson attended a seminar near Boston to discuss evolution and creationism in public schools.

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PRIMARY STAGES

The debate over how life began threatens to last for an eternity, but a team of scientists at Harvard’s Origins of Life in the Universe Initiative, on Garden Street in Cambridge, is working to change that. By studying how primitive cells emerged from simple chemicals, the two-year-old research center—which is yet without its own building but receives \$1 million a year from Harvard and includes 25 astronomers, geneticists, chemists, and planetary scientists—may force the proponents of intelligent design to reconsider their theories.

Here’s why: Many anti-evolutionists contend that if biochemical processes cannot be shown to evolve on their own, then intelligence or a divine plan must have preceded and inaugurated life. Molecular biologist Michael Denton’s 1985 book, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, inspired anti-evolutionists to challenge Darwin by asking why science could not explain how inanimate matter became alive and intelligent. More recently, Lehigh University professor Michael Behe has written that biochemical processes at the molecular level are too complex to be explained by random mutation and natural selection.

Evolutionary scientists respond that if science can prove that life occurred through a random process or by accident, then God either does not exist or did not play a role. Two seemingly unrelated discoveries in the 1990s encouraged these scientists, some of whom would later help found the Origins of Life center. In 1993, a team of molecular biologists, including Origins of Life founding member Jack Szostak, proved that enzymes such as ribozymes—parts of the genetic machinery—might catalyze their own reproduction. Then, in 1995, astronomers at the University of Geneva verified the existence of extrasolar planets orbiting a star, raising the possibility that these new “exoplanets” could support life.

Now Szostak is trying to create an artificial cell that can grow, divide, and evolve by adapting to its changing environment. Meanwhile, the center’s planetary scientists are studying space beyond our solar system to explain how extraterrestrial and Earth-based life could have evolved from inanimate cosmic substances. “This has broadened all of our perspectives by allowing diverse collaborations,” says Szostak.

Initiative director and Harvard astronomy professor Dimitar Sasselov says that such research could lead to fundamental breakthroughs in our understanding of life’s origins. “The potential impact,” he says, “is equal to Newton’s Universal Law of Gravitation.”

Sean McManus

Among the prominent scholars and theologians present was Stephen Jay Gould, the renowned paleontologist from Harvard University. During the meeting, Gould and Johnson engaged in a bitter, two-hour-long debate, which Johnson judged to be a draw.

TO JOHNSON, THE DRAW WAS AS GOOD AS A victory. He had shown that by sticking to the premise of his idea—that science was not being rational in excluding the “theory” that there might be a Creator—intelligent design could hold its own against the kingpin of materialism. By the time he published *Darwin on Trial* two years later, Johnson had teamed up with the Discovery Institute and developed the strategy that he thought would ultimately win the campaign against materialism and science.

After the Bush election in 2000, the intelligent design crusade, riding the Republican conservative resurgence in the country, advanced precipitously. Before some intelligent design proponents thought they were ready, Johnson among them, the issue became a legal maelstrom in Dover and bitterly divided the nation. “The whole issue had become tied up in this red state/blue state political divide,” Johnson says. Intelligent design opponents, he says, see it “as a power play to make George Bush president for life. They have talked themselves into a great fear that America faces a [religious] fascist takeover.”

These days it is almost impossible to discuss intelligent design with anyone, on either side of the debate, without having the discussion come back to political parties and their stances on certain moral issues. Philosophically speaking, the believers in intelligent design point out, if Darwin is right and there is no God nor purpose to our existence, then morality is man made and, among other things, abortion and homosexual marriage are okay.

“I think sex is very important in all this stuff,” Gilder says, when asked why intelligent design is so divisive. “Leftists regard sexual liberation as the most important accomplishment of modernity and they want to claim that it has been a great success. Religion is regarded as the chief opponent of sexual liberation and that’s why there is such hostility to religion. Because God is alleged to oppose promiscuity, polymorphous perversity, whatever you want it to be. Religion is regarded to be the great obstacle to hedonistic fulfillment.”

At times, talking to these once liberal Harvard men, it seemed as if America had been under a political and moral siege since the 1960s and it was their battle to maintain its Puritan roots. Chapman and Gilder—who, like Johnson, gradually slid to the right and embraced religion later in life—contend that it wasn’t so much that they had changed but that society changed around them. It was the Great Society’s legacy of “grotesque” economic and social dislocations, the “appalling” erosion of America’s military power after Vietnam, and the permissive, relativistic, anything-goes attitude of the leftist counterculture that had moved them to the right. And it was Darwinian ideas such as natural selection and survival of the fittest (aided and abetted by Marx and Freud) that had stripped our existence of purpose and, as an



anonymous writer for the Discovery Institute wrote, “infected virtually every area of our culture, from politics and economics to literature and art.”

The defeat at Dover has left Johnson feeling somewhat deflated. “I sometimes feel like a failure,” he says. “I expected we were going to have made a great breakthrough ... and turned around the intellectual zeitgeist by this time.”

Johnson has distanced himself somewhat from the Discovery Institute—and so has Gilder. They say they want to keep intelligent design out of the public school controversy, and out of politics all together. “It’s not that I want some program and a party to take over and rule,” Johnson told me. They stress the need for intellectual discussion and more scientific investigation focusing on the origin of life while continuing the battle for religious liberty because, they say, it is under attack. They do not, however, hold out much hope that their views will get a fair hearing at institutions like Harvard, which they believe have been co-opted by political correctness. Johnson fears that students who lack a proper spiritual foundation will be as misled as he once was.

In the meantime, the push to convert goes on. In the media, on campus, in churches, and sometimes one on one. Neighbor to neighbor, husband to wife, parent to child, and subject to author. Johnson, who has suffered several strokes recently, is still tenacious and did not want to give up on me. But in the end our conversation concluded with uncomfortable silences, gaps that could not be bridged. I was an unlikely convert being wooed by an equally unlikely missionary, and that was where matters would have to remain.