

Case #13: Intelligent Debate about Intelligent Design

Public school boards in at least 19 states have, over the past two decades, debated the teaching of “creationism” about the origins of biological species in tandem with teaching evolution. There are various creationist theories about how species came about, but all require some kind of intervention in (if not outright replacement of) natural history by a being of great power and intelligence. Frequently, this being is the Judeo-Christian God and the method of creation is as outlined in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. Creationism supporters claim that teaching evolution, without offering creationist accounts as an alternative, is a denial of their Constitutional right to have their views expressed systematically in the educational system. The movement makes no effort to disguise its political motivations in its drive to include the Biblical account of creation, or some variation of it, such as “intelligent design,” in public school biology classes.

Many biology teachers in public schools and colleges happen to believe in Biblical accounts of the beginning of the universe and of life. Other biologists believe that adding the creationists’ perspective balances the consideration, gives a fair treatment to different points of view, and helps the students with their skills in critical thinking. Others, however, feel that they are being forced to violate the Constitutional separation of church and state or that they are being asked to present a non-scientific theory as biological science.

A growing number of biology teachers in the lower grades through high school have decided simply to omit evolution from their course syllabi, despite that fact that the American Association for the Advancement of Science has stated unequivocally that knowledge of the basic concepts of evolution must be included in high school science competencies. These abstaining teachers argue that they can never cover everything, so they might as well omit the topics that encourage discussion and controversy, which could endanger their jobs. School principals and superintendents have been inclined recently to support, and even to suggest, this strategy of skipping the topic of evolution. Physics and geology teachers have begun to weigh into the debate as well. They object that creationism conflicts with the big bang theory, accepted by virtually all physicists, and that some versions of creationism contend that the universe has existed for only six thousand years.

Some educational policymakers have encouraged the inclusion of “creationism vs. evolution” in literature or social science courses, rather than in biology classes where evolution currently appears in curricula. Their argument is that liberal arts courses would be more likely to study the different perspectives critically and historically, and in their sociopolitical contexts.

School boards across the country have opted for creationism in a *de facto* way, by selecting science textbooks only if they include creationism. Some districts require stickers appended to their biology textbooks, stating that evolution is only a theory and that there are also viable religious accounts of the origins of life. Federal suits regarding the stickers have occurred in several states. The Kansas school board has included

knowledge about the concept of intelligent design as part of high school exit examinations in Kansas.