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Evolution and dissent

By David K. DeWolf | June 11, 2007

IT'S THE QUESTION that won't go away. Twice during the Republican presidential debates and once at a forum for Democratic candidates, candidates were asked about evolution. For example, in the California debate all the candidates were asked to respond to the question of whether they believed in evolution. In the New Hampshire debate, follow-up questions were asked of former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee and Kansas Senator Sam Brownback. At the Sojourners Forum debate, John Edwards was asked, "Do you believe in evolution or do you believe in creationism?"

As several commentators have pointed out, these are trick questions, because "evolution" was never defined. Do I believe that the Corvette has evolved over the years? Yes, I do. Do I think that it evolved by random mutation and natural selection? No, I don't.

At the New Hampshire debate, Wolf Blitzer asked Arizona Senator John McCain a follow-up question: "Do you believe creationism should be taught alongside evolution in the nation's schools?" This too is a trick question, because no serious advocate wants to teach "creationism." However, there is increasing skepticism among thoughtful scientists of a central claim of neo-Darwinism, namely that complex living systems can be generated from mindless processes like random mutation and natural selection. Thus, the question that Wolf Blitzer should have asked would be along these lines: "Do you think that the topic of Darwinian evolution should be taught objectively in our public schools, with evidence for and against the theory?"

Some candidates would undoubtedly answer "No," asserting that there "is no debate" over evolution and that teaching "both sides" of a non controversy does a disservice to students.

But we have heard that rhetoric elsewhere. For example, Al Gore has famously said that the debate is over regarding global warming. Even assuming that human beings cause global warming, scientists vigorously debate how significant the human contribution is and how beneficial remedial measures would be. "The debate is over" really means, "My mind is made up. Don't confuse me with the facts."

You might think that a public high school is a poor venue for controversies in science. But even in higher education political and ideological agendas are threatening academic freedom. For example, Guillermo Gonzalez, a talented astronomer at Iowa State University, was recently denied tenure. Gonzalez has published 68 scientific papers, more than three times the number normally expected for tenure in his department. His college textbook on astronomy was published by Cambridge University Press. His work has been featured in top scientific journals, including a cover story in Scientific American.

But in 2004 Gonzalez co authored a book, "The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos is Designed for Discovery," which made the case for attributing the life-sustaining features of our planet to something other than random chance. This was too much for some colleagues at ISU. A petition was circulated by a religious studies professor and signed by 120 colleagues, affirming their rejection of "all attempts to represent intelligent design as a scientific endeavor."

Some may have the illusion that science is devoid of politics. But whether we debate the efficacy of a pharmaceutical drug, the risks of electromagnetic radiation, or the potential benefit of embryonic stem cells, financial and ideological agendas are not easily set aside. As bad as political correctness may be in the humanities and social sciences, we should be particularly alarmed by a threat to the right to dissent from the "mainstream" when it comes to scientific knowledge, often a critical component of our public policy.

Those with the courage to challenge reigning orthodoxies ought to be able to follow the scientific evidence where it leads. Some may study the scientific evidence for Darwinian evolution and conclude that there is no God. Some may study the evidence for intelligent design and conclude that atheism is irrational. Some may

reach the conclusion that Darwinian evolution and religious faith are perfectly compatible. The question of how best to explain the appearance of design in the universe should be fair game; scientists, teachers, and students should have the right to reach the answer that each finds most satisfying.

At the next presidential debate, I'd like to hear the following question: "Do you think public school students should be permitted to hear both sides of the debate about Darwinian evolution?" American voters want to know their answers.

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