

Is There Room for Religious Subject Matter in Public School Curricula?

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In, "Political Theory and the Teaching of Creationism," Francis Schrag offers a solution to the evolution versus creationism drama that has played in countless locales across the United States for the past three-quarters of a century.

Schrag argues that neither democratic nor liberal theories provide sufficient grounds for the exclusion of creationism from American public education. He begins by contrasting Amy Gutmann's case for democratic education with her argument against the inclusion of creationism, also known as creation science, in public schools. He argues that Gutmann's application of her own principles of nonrepression and nonexclusion is inconsistent across the two cases. Having considered Gutmann's democratic theory and found it inadequate, Schrag turns his attention to the liberal theories of William Galston, and Stephen Macedo, and contends that their arguments against including creation theory in the public curriculum, like Gutmann's, are not neutral. All of the principal theorists whose ideas are examined by Schrag take positions that favor the inclusion of secular views, and the exclusion of sectarian views, from public school curricula. As Schrag notes, and as religious sectarians also point out, secularism is not a neutral moral position. Secularism is a humanistic position founded on philosophical, rather than theological, premises.

Secular standards of evidence and argument cannot be presumed to be acceptable to all, or even most, democratic citizens, regardless of Gutmann's assertions to the contrary. Standards that are acceptable to the majority of citizens can only be derived by engaging in democratic deliberation. I believe such standards exist. I do not believe, however, that American society has adequately deliberated about and articulated those standards.

Schrag concludes his essay by articulating three conditions upon which creationism can be legitimately included in the public school curriculum. First, citizens in a liberal democratic society must engage in appropriate deliberation processes to reach their decisions. Second, the curriculum under consideration must not evince or promote disrespect for others. Third, the curriculum under consideration must be intended as a supplement to, not as a replacement for, more scientifically credible alternatives.

Schrag's evenhanded approach to the views of both sectarians and secularists is a refreshing contrast to the contentious rhetoric that polarizes both sides of a difficult debate. His proposal, however, leaves open the possibility that non-scientific subject matter can be legitimately included in the science curriculum. This is problematic.

I believe there is room in American classrooms to discuss creationist and other accounts of human origins. I do not believe, however, that science classrooms as

they are currently constituted are the appropriate abodes of such discussions. The difficulty I have with this position is that origin accounts are a significant point at which science and the humanities intersect. Ideally, science and humanities curricula should be integrated rather than departmentalized. In an integrated curriculum, scientific, philosophical, and religious accounts would be examined side by side. American public school curriculum, however, is rarely integrated. That being the case, if science teachers are expected to teach only science in their classrooms, then creationist and other non-scientific origin accounts must remain outside the doors of science classrooms.

Two compelling reasons to include evolutionary theories in the science curriculum are that those theories (a) have been derived through scientific methods, and (b) continue to be applied in scientific research. As evolutionary theories are applied in research they are refined. Those theories that are found deficient are discarded. Evolutionary theories will continue to provide theoretical bases for research until their fruitfulness expires. The significance of evolutionary theories lies, and will continue to lie, in their explanatory and predictive powers.

Creation science, notwithstanding its name, is not a scientifically derived theory, nor is it open to substantial revision. Additionally, creationism has no predictive power. These characteristics disqualify creationism as a bona fide scientific theory. They do not, however, disqualify creationism and other religious accounts as suitable topics for inclusion in other areas of the curriculum. The question remains, though, in which parts of the curriculum do such accounts belong?

Multicultural educational theory provides one key that can open the door through which appropriate examination of religion can enter into the public schools. Discussion of the multiplicity of cultures that co-exist, often uneasily, in the United States affords opportunities to examine the belief bases that have led to cultural contact, cultural collision, cultural assimilation, cultural annihilation, and cultural enrichment. Understanding of diverse human cultures necessarily includes familiarity with the theological and philosophical underpinnings of those cultures. When those underpinnings are excised from the curriculum, what remains is simply the perpetuation of stereotypes via "Heroes and Holidays" and "Foods and Fiestas" curricula.

Multicultural education that is poorly executed can exacerbate religious and social tensions. Multicultural education that is well executed offers students opportunities to compare, contrast, understand, and appreciate a varied range of cultural, religious, and social beliefs and practices. It is important to note, also, that multicultural education is best performed when it permeates, not when it is added to, the entire school curriculum. Thus, the appropriate curricular locales for discussion of non-scientific human origin accounts, and other religious beliefs, are many. Such accounts and beliefs can be examined in social studies classes. They can be examined in art and music classes. They can be examined in literature and philosophy classes. The list of possibilities could continue ad infinitum.

Broad inclusion of religious subject matter in public school curricula can have at least two positive results. First, students' understanding of religion can be

enhanced. This does not entail that students subscribe to a particular body of beliefs. It merely entails that students be exposed to a wide range of religious beliefs, and that they begin to understand the motivations such beliefs provide for peoples' behavior. Second, the curriculum content in all of these subject areas can be enriched by the addition of religious subject matter. Some of the world's most poignant art, music, and poetry has been inspired by religion. Some of the most profound ideas ever expounded about human social relations are contained in religious writings.

It is impossible to study critically either the humanities or the sciences without understanding the religious influences that have pervaded their development. Representatives of both the Radical Right and the Liberal Left recognize this fact, and have argued that the public school curriculum should include serious consideration of the role religious beliefs and practices have played, and continue to play, in human life.¹ Students in a democratic pluralistic society should be given opportunities to study such beliefs seriously and intelligently.

If students are to understand and appreciate the cultural diversity of the United States, they must be taught that diversity occurs within, as well as across, religious and social groups. Students can be taught that Creation Science is not the only Christian origins account. Two other accounts to which Christians subscribe are Progressive Creation, and Theistic Evolution. Progressive Creation is a view that accepts microevolution and rejects macroevolution. Progressive Creationists believe that evolutionary variations within species occur naturally, and that new species are produced solely by divine intervention. Theistic Evolution is the view that God is the divine creator who uses evolutionary processes as his instruments of creation.² These two views demonstrate that religious origin accounts are not inexorably incompatible with evolutionary theories. Acknowledgement of this fact is an important step toward dissolving the false dichotomy between science and religion that has been created and sustained by polarizing rhetoric.

The Constitutional proscription against promoting religion in public schools does not ban all examination of religion from the schools. Nevertheless, American educators have paid insufficient attention to the appropriate inclusion of religious subject matter in the curriculum. This is one reason why creationism continues to contend, inappropriately under current conditions, for a position in the science curriculum. Educators need to unlock the doors to the rooms in the curriculum in which critical examination of religion can and should occur. This examination can be undertaken without violating Constitutional constraints. Indeed, there is ample room for religious subject matter in the public schools.

1. Pat Robertson, *The Turning Tide* (Dallas: Word Publishers Company), 1993, exemplifies a view from the Radical Right. Jeffrey A. Milligan, "Teaching at the Crossroads of Faith and School: The Teacher as Prophetic Pragmatist," online at: http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/eps/pes-yearbook/97_docs/milligan.html

2. B.A. Robinson, "Evolution vs. Creation Science," online at: <http://www.lawyernet.com/members/jimfesq/wca/1996/26/deep.html>