

Science and God

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The word "evolution" is a kind of post-modern Pavlov's bell. At the mere mention of it, two parallel lines begin to form. On one, scientists stand ready to defend biology's central organizing principle. On the other are creationists of various kinds protecting their faith in Biblical truth.

The debate between them often is sparked by the teaching of evolution in public elementary schools and high school science classes. That has happened in past years in Kansas, Missouri and Pennsylvania, and something similar is beginning to play out in Florida and Texas.

It's all but inevitable that their dispute will be portrayed as a contest between religion and science, but a report published last week by the prestigious National Academies of Science objects to such a characterization.

"Science and religion are different ways of understanding," the report concludes. "Needlessly placing them in opposition reduces the potential of both to contribute to a better future."

There certainly is truth in those statements. Dr. Francis S. Collins, who led the Human Genome Project and helped identify genes that cause cystic fibrosis and Huntington's disease, is one of many important scientists who has written extensively about his belief in God. Major religious groups as diverse as the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Roman Catholic Church have affirmed that belief in evolution is not contrary to their theologies.

But it also is undeniably true that science and religion have found themselves in conflict repeatedly over the centuries. Nicolaus Copernicus waited 25 years, until he was on his deathbed, to publish his proof that the earth revolves around the sun.

Charles Darwin waited 20 years to publish his theories of evolution. He was demonized for them. But over the past 150 years, a still-accumulating mountain of evidence continues to prove him fundamentally correct.

The current debates about teaching evolution are nonsensical, but they continue nevertheless. In Florida, science standards now require students to be taught about "biological changes over time." Education officials want to substitute the word "evolution" for that long-winded description, but they're running into opposition.

In Texas, the director of the state's science curriculum recently was forced out of her job for sending an e-mail that officials there said made her agency appear biased against intelligent design, a thinly disguised version of creationism.

Science educators should reject the teaching of intelligent design because, notwithstanding the protests of its supporters, it is not science. In fact, when proponents tried to get it incorporated into Kansas education standards, they had to rewrite the definition of science to clear the way.

American students score lower than their peers in most other developed countries on standardized science tests. American universities bemoan the paucity of American-born candidates for advanced degrees in science and engineering. One way to improve the situation is for science educators to keep their science classes focused on science.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch "CNS."

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