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THOUGHTS ON TEACHING ORIGINS IN A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL SCIENCE CLASS

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on: 1) the legality of teaching origins, including evidence for creation, in a public high school science class; 2) teaching a two-model approach; and 3) dealing with outside intimidation groups.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching about origins in a high school science class is not only constitutional in the United States, it can be one of the highlights of the year for both teacher and students. Various pressure groups would have educators believe that teaching evidences that support the Creation Model of origins is somehow illegal; however, a science teacher is certainly within his/her rights to present various views, research, and data from different scientists on the subject of origins, regardless of prevailing, "popular" opinions.

Around the turn of the century, current scientific thinking held that man would never fly. Where would we be today if the Wright brothers did not have the courage to at least consider evidence from their own research, which was contrary to the predominant, yet erroneous conclusions of their more esteemed contemporaries? The history of science is rife with examples where current scientific thought was in error.

THE TWO-MODEL APPROACH

The question often arises, why teach a two-model approach on origins? I can think of at least five good reasons for doing so:

1. Issues with divergent viewpoints stimulate great classroom interaction. The exciting nature of the topic of origins motivates students to get involved with the class, ask questions and share their ideas. Almost every student, regardless of academic prowess has thought about his origin, and therefore, has some opinion on the subject.
2. As a public school teacher, I feel I owe it to my students to present a complete, unbiased picture. I view my role as an educator like a journalist views his; to present the ideas and scientific data on both sides of the question, and then allow the audience to reach its own conclusions.
3. Students gain a clearer understanding of both views from a two-model approach. Studies indicate that learning only one model (either creation or evolution) lessens their understanding of that point of view. A two-model approach allows students to compare arguments and forces them to organize their data and opinions.
4. Surveys in many states nationwide show that a majority of the public favors the teaching of creation in addition to evolution. As a public school teacher, I feel a responsibility to honor this desire.
5. The subject of origins affords students great mental exercise. After discussing evidences for creation with an evolutionist colleague, she made this interesting statement: "I feel that students should be exposed to all the evidence. The thought processes that the issue forces the student to undertake are almost more valuable than the final conclusion they reach."

DEALING WITH INTIMIDATION

Because the opposition usually has no legal basis for stopping the teaching of creation evidences in the classroom, they very often will resort to various forms of intimidation, the goal being to scare teachers into keeping silent on the issue. As a teacher, there are several things one must consider before yielding to the opposition.

You Are Not Alone

First of all, realize that you are not alone. One of the most effective strategies intimidation groups use is to make their target feel singled out and alone. This is hardly the case. There are many groups and organizations(1) that are ready, willing and able to come to your aid, to give you sound advice as to how to proceed, and even to provide expert legal services if needed.

My worst fears were realized one day in April of 1985 when I received an intimidating phone call at the high school where I teach from the director of the legal arm of the ACLU in Chicago. He "just wanted to talk" about how I dealt with the subject of origins in my science classes. He was probing for evidence which I was sure he would try to use against me in the future. Fortunately, I gave him no information, and he told me he would call back in a week after I had consulted with my administration. (Incidentally, another strategy of intimidation groups is to keep their victim wasting time in endless meetings and correspondence, thereby attempting to limit his/her performance in the classroom.)

It was during the first week after that phone call and also in the months to follow, I realized I definitely was not alone. I contacted the director of The Caleb Campaign, which is a group dedicated to helping teachers (also parents and students) in situations like mine. He advised me not to volunteer any information to the ACLU, and to allow my administration to get involved by handling any future ACLU inquiries.

As the situation escalated, and the ACLU broadened their attack to include the entire school district, The Caleb Campaign developed a strategy to defend both the school district and me. They provided valuable advice in meetings with the administration and ultimately they contacted the Rutherford Institute in Washington D.C., an organization that provides legal services to individuals or groups who are attacked by the ACLU or similar organizations.

An Encouraging Phone Call

I shall always remember the encouraging phone call I received in July of 1985 from John Whitehead, the President of the Rutherford Institute, and author of several books on constitutional law. He said, "Don't worry about a thing. Your job is to just keep doing what you've been doing in the classroom. Continue to follow the advice you've been getting, and we'll deal with any legal issues if the need arises."

Opposing Strategies

The ACLU's original strategy basically shifted from their attack on me (teaching "religion" in the classroom) to attacking my school district for "promoting religion" especially with federal funds. Our strategy hinged on the fact that the ACLU repeatedly requested information regarding my teaching of "creation science", or the district's promotion of "creation science". My defense was (and still is) that I am not sure what the ACLU meant by "creation science" and that I am a "science" teacher; not a "creation science" teacher, whatever that is.

Now this may simply seem like an exercise in semantics to you, but when one stops to think about it, what really is the definition of "creation science" and what is a "creation science" teacher? Just ask ten of your friends to define these terms for you, and you will see that you will get ten different definitions. Which ones did the ACLU mean, if any? If they can get a teacher to admit that he/she teaches something called "creation science", you'd better believe that they then will be able to define it in a court of law. And their definition of what a teacher does in the classroom will undoubtedly be nothing like what the teacher actually does in the classroom.

The bottom line is, never admit anything to an intimidation group. Let them define their terms and prove that the teacher somehow fits them. The burden of proof and effort will be shifted to them and the teacher can concentrate on what he/she is supposed to be doing in the classroom.

EPILOGUE

The ACLU from time to time inquires as to what's going on with "creation science" in our district. Since they never provide a definition of what that means and, as far as I know, our district only employs "science" teachers, they have been completely stymied in their efforts to develop any significant threat to the teaching of good science in our schools.

SOME HELPFUL NOTES

Realize that intimidation groups count on your ignorance of the law and your basic rights as a citizen and teacher. For example in Illinois we have a Freedom of Information Act which entitles persons or groups access to various public records. The ACLU mentioned this act when requesting information from my public school district and me. The Illinois Freedom of Information Act expressly exempts teachers from providing copies of their curricula under this act. Of course, the ACLU didn't mention this exemption in their "request".

Based on this experience, my advice is to never assume that your adversary is necessarily telling you the whole truth. Realize also that local lawyers frequently are not familiar with specific laws on educational issues. Laws that are on the books are a matter of public record. Go to the library or your local governmental representative to get a copy of a particular law and read it for yourself.

We also found that intimidation groups will tell different people different stories to gain information. This is commonly known as lying. Therefore, never assume that your adversary is playing the game "fairly". If you are told that a colleague (administrator, etc.) has given them certain information or permission to request information, go to that person and check it out for yourself. Do not trust them-- this is a common ploy for their "fishing expeditions".

CONCLUSIONS

It has been my experience that most science teachers, if pressed, would admit that the evidence for evolution, as presented to them in their formal training, is quite convincing; and therefore, they would tend to lean toward a belief in evolution. However, I am encouraged by the observation that when these same teachers are presented with the scientific evidence supporting the Creation Model, they (at the very minimum) are stimulated to seriously consider presenting this information to their students. Most science teachers are not aware of what the creationist point of view is because their education has been censored. If they knew more about it, they probably would teach it.

Furthermore, the subject of origins need not be a controversial issue inside or outside the classroom. If a teacher truly attempts to present a two-model view on origins as a news reporter would-- simply relaying the information on a story with divergent opinions-- no one can accuse him of impropriety. It is when we as educators dictate the conclusions which students should reach on origins that we are treading on thin ice.

The subject of origins can be a dynamic and exciting exercise for teachers and students alike and it need not be a contested issue within a school or community. Both parents and students appreciate honesty and they are entitled to it in the classroom.

REFERENCES:

- 1) The organizations referred to in this paper can be contacted at:
The Caleb Campaign, P.O. Box 608, Herrin, IL 62948, (618) 942-7520;
The Rutherford Institute, P.O. Box 510, Manassas, VA 22110, (703) 369-0100.
- 2) For further information on teaching a two-model approach that works, the following materials are available postpaid from Creative Media, 6305 Ojibwa Lane, McHenry, IL 60050, (815) 344-9435:
Complete curriculum with photocopy masters \$15;
The Great Debate Video \$27.95.

