

Voice of the people

'Religion and the tolerant state'

CHICAGO—The editorial "Religion and the tolerant state" (Dec. 14) illustrates the fallacy and consequences of straining to keep religion out of the public schools. The creation myth as handed down to us by Moses is Judaic before it is Christian. It is not solely in the cosmology of Christianity.

Editorial writers, as the majority of graduates of our public schools, seem to be misinformed about a very large part of our cultural heritage because it is labeled "religion" and therefore must be shunned.

While the U.S. Constitution does expressly prohibit establishment of (a state) religion, it does not prohibit references to a creator or great spirit. It does not prohibit study of the several religious writings that form a great part of our cultural heritage.

History is distorted when we blank out men's beliefs as motivation for their acts. Literature loses its enchantment when we no longer recognize the allusions to persons and events mentioned in the books of Moses or the later stories about their heroes and prophets of Israel or of the early Christian era.

Prohibiting the public schools from acquainting children with the creation myths under the guise of separation of church and state robs them of our and their roots and the richness of human thought and feeling. It indicates also that editorialists and educationalists are inherently unable to distinguish between study and indoctrination.

Sam Venturella

Sam is banking up wrong
true. The Bible as literature
is fine - but not as science.

So what!

Okay, but
don't "acquaint"
them with
it in the
guise of
science!

so you mean a
critical comparative
study - or
fundamentalist
pseudoscience?

Sam also
seems unable
to distinguish
his call to study
and the creationist
attempt to
indoctrinate.

The creationists label their idea a scientific
theory, not just cultural heritage.

Religion and the tolerant state

Times of religious revival test a society's commitment to the principle of religious tolerance. They raise stark questions of the authority of God and of the state that in more indifferent periods simply get no notice. And they also raise subtler issues that try the wisdom of even those who deeply and sincerely want to keep toleration the first article of the constitutional faith.

In Washington the U.S. Supreme Court has held that a state university that permits student groups to gather for secular discussions on university property may not constitutionally forbid student religious gatherings. An evangelical Christian group called Cornerstone challenged the University of Missouri on this point and won.

The university argued that if it had allowed its property to be used by students voluntarily gathering for religious services, this would have amounted to a state policy "establishing" a religion in violation of the Constitution's 1st Amendment. But granting the use of public facilities to religious groups is not establishing a state religion if access is granted to all groups—religious and secular—on equal terms. The university policy favored non-religious discussion by forbidding religious gatherings. It was clearly not neutral. And this absence of neutrality between religious and secular groups is what rendered it unconstitutional.

In Little Rock, Ark., another case is under way in federal court, and it presents a somewhat more difficult problem. It involves a constitutional challenge to a state law requiring the teaching of "scientific creationism" along with the theory of evolution in public school science classes.

Here the idea of government neutrality cuts differently than it did in the Missouri case. Supporters of the Arkansas law contend that all it requires is that students be exposed to both the Darwinian and the Biblical theories of the origin of man. But even if that were the whole of it, it would not be a neutral government policy. The Biblical version of creation is only one of many religious views on the subjects. Eastern religions, for example, have far different conceptions of cosmology than Christianity's, conceptions that in some ways conflict less with modern scientific theories than the literal creation story in the Bible.

Beyond this obvious lack of neutrality, there is a deeper problem. Even if Arkansas required that every religious vision of man's beginnings be taught alongside the evolution theory, the law would still be unconstitutional.

The public schools are simply not the right place for religious instruction. Just as the state cannot be entrusted to decide what political messages people may be exposed to and what messages should be censored, it cannot be trusted to determine what religious teaching children need. The state, which requires children to attend school, must not be allowed to indoctrinate those children in any religious creed, because this would indeed amount to the establishment of a religion, something properly forbidden by the Constitution.

Make no mistake about it; what Arkansas wants taught is not a neutral lesson in comparative religions but rather the idea that the Biblical

validity as the theory of evolution. The hard question raised by sophisticated advocates of a scientific creationism curriculum is whether the theory—even though it derives from Scripture—also happens to satisfy the secular standards of science. Surely public schools cannot be forbidden from discussing the repugnance of murder simply because Moses' commandments forbade it. Surely it is not inappropriate for a public school to teach events of ancient history simply because the Bible relates them. On the other hand, simply labeling religious myth a science does not make it a proper subject of public school instruction.

And so it is up to the courts to determine whether scientific creationism qualifies by secular standards of science. The beginning of the inquiry ought to be whether any data, any conceivable data short of God's own revelation, could demonstrate to the creationists the invalidity of their theory.

A creationist, if he were completely honest, would have to admit that data are not the ultimate source of the legitimacy of his theory. The theory's validity is based on an act of faith, a religious act. Fact neither shapes nor shakes this belief. It is grounded upon the absolute and eternal, not on the ephemeral and tentative discoveries of researchers. And as honorable, even enviable, as such a mighty belief may be, it is not a science and never can be.

The case the creationists have tried to build is like a lawyer's brief. It may be argued in terms that are supposed to sound like science. But it begins and ends with dogma, not with the rebuttable, continuously refined and revised propositions of science.