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EDITORIAL

The Crafty Attacks on Evolution

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Critics of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution become more wily with each passing year. Creationists who believe that God made the world and everything in it pretty much as described in the Bible were frustrated when their efforts to ban the teaching of evolution in the public schools or inject the teaching of creationism were judged unconstitutional by the courts. But over the past decade or more a new generation of critics has emerged with a softer, more roundabout approach that they hope can pass constitutional muster.

One line of attack - on display in Cobb County, Ga., in recent weeks - is to discredit evolution as little more than a theory that is open to question. Another strategy - now playing out in Dover, Pa. - is to make students aware of an alternative theory called "intelligent design," which infers the existence of an intelligent agent without any specific reference to God. These new approaches may seem harmless to a casual observer, but they still constitute an improper effort by religious advocates to impose their own slant on the teaching of evolution.

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The Cobb County fight centers on a sticker that the board inserted into a new biology textbook to placate opponents of evolution. The school board, to its credit, was trying to strengthen the teaching of evolution after years in which it banned study of human origins in the elementary and middle schools and sidelined the topic as an elective in high school, in apparent violation of state curriculum standards. When the new course of study raised hackles among parents and citizens (more than 2,300 signed a petition), the board sought to quiet the controversy by placing a three-sentence sticker in the textbooks:

"This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered."

Although the board clearly thought this was a reasonable compromise, and many readers might think it unexceptional, it is actually an insidious effort to undermine the science curriculum. The first sentence sounds like a warning to parents that the film they are about to watch with their children contains pornography. Evolution is so awful that the reader must be warned that it is discussed inside the textbook. The second sentence makes it sound as though evolution is little more than a hunch, the popular understanding of the word "theory," whereas theories in science are carefully constructed frameworks for understanding a vast array of facts. The National Academy of Sciences, the nation's most prestigious scientific organization, has declared evolution "one of the strongest and most useful scientific theories we have" and says it is supported by an overwhelming scientific consensus.

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The third sentence, urging that evolution be studied carefully and critically, seems like a fine idea. The only problem is, it singles out evolution as the only subject so shaky it needs critical judgment. Every subject in the curriculum should be studied carefully and critically. Indeed, the interpretations taught in history, economics, sociology, political science, literature and other fields of study are far less grounded in fact and professional consensus than is evolutionary biology.

A more honest sticker would describe evolution as the dominant theory in the field and an extremely fruitful scientific tool. The sad fact is, the school board, in its zeal to be accommodating, swallowed the language of the anti-evolution crowd. Although the sticker makes no mention of religion and the school board as a whole was not trying to advance religion, a federal judge in Georgia ruled that the sticker amounted to an unconstitutional endorsement of religion because it was rooted in long-running religious challenges to evolution. In particular, the sticker's assertion that "evolution is a theory, not a fact" adopted the latest tactical language used by anti-evolutionists to dilute Darwinism, thereby putting the school board on the side of religious critics of evolution. That court decision is being appealed. Supporters of sound science education can only hope that the courts, and school districts, find a way to repel this latest assault on the most well-grounded theory in modern biology.

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