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In the debate over religion in public schools, the most vocal activists stake out two positions that are difficult to compromise. On one hand are religious adherents who believe that religious values must be reflected in the education system if each generation is to successfully navigate an increasingly immoral and secular world. On the other hand are activists who believe that religion and religious references should be banned from all elements of public life, including public schools. However, most Americans do not take such extreme positions or consistently support proposals made by either side in the polarized debate.



The central issues in the debate involve what role should religion play in public life, and what activities and practices are allowed under the Constitution. Citizens will all certainly hold different views on what role religion should have in public life. Therefore, we typically turn to interpretations of the Constitution to understand what role religion can have.

A variety of court rulings have made it clear that the government must avoid adopting policies that require public school students to participate in religious practices like prayer or Bible study. However, court rulings have also made it clear that public school students should be free to practice religion in schools as long as it is a student-organized activity that occurs during periods of time where students are allowed to choose their activity. In addition, court rulings have made it clear that public schools that rent space or allow for meetings of student groups must allow access to meetings of religious groups as well. All of the efforts to expand religious activity in schools have occurred with the intent of combating what some see as an increasingly secular education system that teaches values inconsistent with religious moral codes.

One group that has worked on these issues is the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), which has litigated several cases that protect access to schools by religious groups and allow for some forms of school prayer. The concern over the secular nature of the public schools is evident in a quote from ACLJ's Chief Counsel, Jay Sekulow. A January 2, 1997 article in the *Danbury News-Times* quotes Sekulow as saying, "Can you imagine, that in public schools of America today, students are being taught that homosexual conduct, which in many states is still deemed illegal, is not only a viable alternative lifestyle, but is actually equal to heterosexual relationships?"

On the other side of the issue, such groups as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have sought to ensure that public school students are not forced to participate in religious activities and that they are not exposed to religious messages developed or promoted by educators. This has meant litigating against schools that allow displays for religious holidays, among other activities. Such lawsuits have typically angered local parents and Americans in general.



Some of the more recent alleged efforts to bring more religion into public schools have involved the teaching of evolution. Across the country, local and state school boards have adopted policies that range from requiring teachers to tell students that evolution is a theory and not fact, to openly teaching alternative views of human origins, such as creationism or Intelligent Design (ID). The central issue in this portion of the debate is that evolution as a theory does not outline a role for a divine creator, which some observers suggest conflicts directly with biblical teachings concerning the origins of the Earth.

Proponents of ID argue that scientists disagree about evolution and that the theory is inconsistently supported by empirical evidence. ID is simply an alternative theory of origins.

Opponents of ID argue that ID is not a testable scientific theory because it attributes creation to a supernatural cause, which cannot be proven or disproved. Furthermore, ID opponents argue that teaching ID would simply be a backdoor method for reintroducing God into the classroom.

Recent developments suggest that ID proponents may be losing ground. In December 2005, a court overturned a Dover, Pennsylvania, school board policy that had required teachers to read a disclaimer to students about the theory of evolution. Likewise, in February 2006, the Ohio Board of Education removed a model lesson plan it had previously adopted that would have required students to be able to "describe how scientists continue to investigate and critically analyze aspects of evolutionary theory." These were significant defeats for the ID movement and led columnist Cal Thomas to argue that these developments should persuade parents who have been waffling on this issue to join the growing exodus from state schools to private or home school environments where their religious values are supported.

The suggestion by Thomas reflects the final notable trend in this debate. Since the 1980s, many parents have removed their children from public schools and have begun home schooling the children. The trend has been so dramatic that an entire industry has developed to support lesson plans and curriculum for home schooled students. These lessons, even in science and math, often have religious components.

Outlook

The trends in the conflict over religion in schools suggest that the debate will continue for some time to come, with perhaps new dimensions continuing to appear. The debate is likely to persist because public opinion polls continue to suggest that Americans tend to support some amount of religion in the public schools and are supportive of teaching students about Intelligent Design. Americans are also supportive of schools celebrating religious holidays like Christmas. Likewise, interest groups and elected officials clearly are interested in keeping the debate alive.

Donald P. Haider-Markel

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