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Science-Belief Tension Is Natural

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Science-belief tension is natural

For the moment, evolution seems to be winning the battle with intelligent design. Last December, federal judge John Jones resoundingly rejected the teaching of intelligent design in Dover, Pa., schools.

Then, in February, the Ohio Board of Education voted to remove criticism of evolution from its high school biology curriculum. And now scientists have discovered fossil evidence for the crucial evolutionary link between sea and land animals.

Yet these victories are likely to do little to quell the larger battle over our origins. To the contrary, there remains a more fundamental dimension to the evolution-intelligent design debate that is impervious to any judicial resolution, school board vote, or even scientific evidence.

Those who oppose intelligent design refuse to acknowledge religious proponents' sincere concern that evolution threatens faith. Even Judge Jones rejected as "utterly false" the assumption that evolution is antithetical to religion. But evolution is in tension with religion.

Certainly, evolution cannot easily be squared with the Genesis creation story. But more important, evolution presents a world that is random and purposeless, not a divine world that is intentional and meaningful.

Religious believers understandably want children taught that they are not haphazard evolutionary byproducts but rather sacred beings worthy of dignity

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and respect.

Those who favor intelligent design are as equally dismissive of scientific knowledge. They refuse to admit that we cannot prove the existence of a supreme being. They unwaveringly accept that there is a divine purpose behind the universe and brashly reject those things that hold up to scientific testing.

These two sides may be forever locking horns, but it would help if each acknowledged the other's concerns. Religious proponents, for instance, are right to think that we should teach children that every individual is deserving of dignity and respect. But they are wrong to think that this value should be taught in science classes.

Instead, this value should be taught in history and civics classes when students learn how "We the People" made a commitment to create a society based on respect for human dignity. Students will discover this commitment in our nation's decision to create a government based on popular sovereignty.

They will witness it in the panoply of rights we afford individuals: due process of law, freedom of speech, protection against unreasonable searches, and the right to practice any religion or no religion at all.

They will realize that the Constitution, which never men-

tions God, embodies our secular society's commitment to treat people as if they are sacred.

Secularists, on the other hand, are right to claim that we cannot disregard science.

We cannot afford to teach our children that they may reject widely accepted scientific theories because they conflict with their faith. This will only lead to what journalist Bill Moyers

calls the politics of delusion. After all, scientists may not be able to tell us whether there is an intelligent designer, but they have told us that the ice caps are melting, that glaciers are rapidly disappearing, and that the world's temperature is rising.

As a society, we cannot ignore these warnings by dismissing them as part of a larger, unknowable plan. If our knowledge tells us that the world is ailing, then we must act upon that knowledge to heal it.

We may never know whether there is a divine intelligent designer but we should nonetheless design an intelligent world. That is a world in which children are taught to cherish and respect human dignity, and are encouraged to apply their acquired knowledge to help ensure that meaningful life will be sustained.

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