



March 20, 2006

The Sun Orbits a Flat Earth

A Little History

It's been a long time since [Galileo](#) was threatened with incarceration and even death for stating that the earth revolved around the sun and NOT the other way around. His reestablishing of [Copernicus' theory](#) went against the teachings of the Roman Catholic church at that time. Nowadays, death would seem a rather severe penalty for testing and proving a scientific hypothesis with observable data. Obviously, this did not happen in the [United States](#) and it did not happen in the 21st century!

With the adoption of the [Constitution](#) and the [Bill of Rights](#), our American predecessors foresaw the need to state quite clearly that government was not to impinge upon the individual religious pursuits of others. Article VI of the Constitution and the [FIRST amendment](#) are vital for our democracy to flourish. People of all faiths had flocked to America in the hopes of establishing a society free from religious oppression. Only twenty years prior to the signing of the constitution, and the erection of a "wall of separation between church and state", [Baptists](#) were whipped and imprisoned for practicing their faith and [Catholics](#), [Quakers](#) and [Jews](#) were not permitted to hold office but WERE required to pay extra taxes to support the "established" colonial churches – faiths other than their own. The right to pursue (or not) your own faith and the right to live one's life free from having the religious constraints of other people forced upon you is a cornerstone of our identity as a nation.

During the past eighty years, the [ACLU](#) has challenged many sectarian attempts to impose their religious beliefs and practices on others through governmental and legislative means. In 1925, the ACLU defended the biology teacher [John Scopes](#) during the famous "[monkey trial](#)" in Tennessee. (Please watch the movie "[Inherit the Wind!!](#)") During the 1930's, the ACLU supported the rights of [Jehovah's Witness](#) schoolchildren not to salute the [American flag](#) – a violation of their religious beliefs. Subsequently, the ACLU has successfully challenged official prayers and [Bible](#) readings in the nation's public schools, and



has successfully fought over many, many bills mandating that public schools must teach "[scientific creationism](#)".

In [1947](#), the [US Supreme Court](#) proclaimed, "The First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state. That wall must be kept high and impregnable. We would not approve the slightest breach." They further added, "Neither a state nor the Federal Government...can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another." ([Everson v Board of Education, 330 US 1](#))

The Nitty Gritty

All this may seem like quite a while ago, but the truth is, the citizens of the state of Wisconsin still face challenges to these guaranteed constitutional liberties. [During December 2005, a federal judge in Dover, PA ruled in favor of the ACLU, that intelligent design could not be taught in school](#) – intelligent design being a euphemism for creationism, the Judeo-Christian bible's version of the earth's creation. (Not to be confused with the very popular [Spaghetti Monster](#) version.) [Intelligent Design](#) is fundamentally a religious doctrine...a sort of "Creationism-lite...half the calories, all the flavor". (Info from NY Times: www.nytimes.com)

In [Grantsburg, WI](#) during 2004, the Grantsburg School Board thought that the Wisconsin state law mandating that evolution be taught in schools was too prohibitive. That October they voted to include, "When theories of origin are taught, students will study various scientific models or theories of origin and identify the scientific data supporting each" to be incorporated. This law could potentially allow Intelligent Design to be taught. Moreover, [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#) spokesperson, [Joseph Donovan](#), stated that their motion was perfectly legal. Additionally, [Dr. Joni Burgin](#), Grantsburg School Superintendent agrees with her School Board and adds that it "should not be totally inclusive of just one scientific theory" – the School Board having voted to "...teach all theories of origins". (Info from Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: www.jsonline.com and National Center for Science Education: www.ncseweb.org .)



You may believe there is no cause for worry. After all, there would seem to be a big difference between allowing for multiple scientific theories and implementing creationism in a science class. However, consider the following information, gleaned from the [National Center for Science Education](#) website. [David Ahlquist](#), the [School Board president](#) is also a [pastor at a local Baptist church](#). In 2004, a local newspaper reported that his church had hosted Dr. Ron Carlson, a creationist who believes Earth to be less than 10,000 years old and who travels the world giving lectures and writing on "[Keep Faith Out of the Classroom](#)", "[The Abomination of Harry Potter](#)" and "[Warning: Christianity and Yoga Do Not Mix](#)".

After much ado, the Grantsburg School Board voted to change its science policy, explicitly stating that the "policy does not call for the teaching of Creationism or Intelligent Design". The entire School Board except for their President David Ahlquist voted for the revision.

This reversal may have been partly inspired by the many letters received signed by [43 of the University of Wisconsin System's deans](#) and another from over [300 religious studies and science faculty members from 42 Wisconsin academic facilities](#) encouraging the board to change their policy.

Their letters emphasize a point that needs to be made clear. There IS NO BIG DEBATE on evolutionary theory creating huge currents in the scientific community. Creation agenda proponents frequently attempt to incorporate intelligent design by insisting that since evolution is "just a theory", then alternative ideas such as their own should be taught as well, "especially since there is such debate over evolution". Is this supposedly how the world is arguing over the [theory of gravity](#)? Michael Cox, a professor of biochemistry at the [University of Wisconsin, Madison](#), specifically referred to this as an attempt "to introduce fake science as science into the school curriculum in public schools" in Wisconsin. "There is no significant controversy within the scientific community about the validity of evolution...Evolution is one of the most robust and widely accepted principles of modern science ", states the Board of Directors for the [American Association for the Advancement of Science \(AAAS\)](#) in a February 2006 address from St. Louis, MO. AAAS is considered to be the world's largest general scientific society and certainly one of the most prestigious science organizations.



(Info from the American Association for the Advancement of Science
<http://www.aaasmeeting.org/evolution>)

Another different area of concern is that many proponents of Intelligent Design feel that to believe in the theory of evolution is to disbelieve in God – that this is somehow un-Christian. This is a favorite argument used to woo others to their cause. On the contrary, nowhere in Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" or his subsequent scientific works does he assert this. Belief in evolution neither excludes nor precludes belief in God. The inherent problem is NOT that belief in God should not be taught at all, but rather that matters pertaining to God should not be taught in a Public School's science class. Discussion of religious or spiritual matters rightfully belong in places of worship, secular schools, philosophy classes or comparative religion classes and not indoctrinated into public education. This is done to also protect the rights of the religions themselves. Look how the initial creationist belief itself has "evolved" into a more PC-friendly Intelligent Design theory, so that it is more palatable by an American public who believes in the separation of church and state. Many, if not most, Christian churches have specifically come forward to explain how belief in evolution in NO WAY conflicts with or opposes their particular belief system. Moreover, Dr. Gilbert S. Omenn, a professor of medicine, genetics and public health at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, assures the public that, "religious beliefs and scientific pursuits can readily co-exist -- just not in science classrooms, lest we confuse our children about what is and isn't science." (Info from National Science Teachers Association's NSTA Express: <http://science.nsta.org/nstaexpress>) and from the AAAS <http://www.aaasmeeting.org/evolution>)

Additionally important, a third letter of great significance has come to the foreground as well. With the encouragement of [Dr. Michael Zimmerman](#), the Dean of the College of Letters and Science at [UW-Oshkosh](#), the Reverend John T. McFadden of the [First Congressional United Church of Christ in Appleton, WI](#) drafted an "[Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science](#)". In two thoughtfully worded paragraphs it emphasizes that many "believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist." Actually in a sermon appropriately entitled, "[We Will Not](#)



Limit God”, Reverend McFadden explains that “to say that God could not have brought the worlds into being through a process that cosmologists call ‘the Big Bang’ or to say that God could not choose to cover this earth with life in all its infinite variety through the process of natural selection is not defending God, it is limiting God. While we are not so naïve as to pretend that knowledge cannot be used to evil ends, we believe that ignorance is far more destructive.”

In a recent phone conversation we had with Reverend McFadden, he explained the necessity of crafting such a letter and that, although it is somewhat “reductionist”, it is done “not to mock members of different faiths”, but to illustrate that the “clear truths of science don’t diminish faith...they enrich it.” Over 10,300 clergy have signed this letter to date.

On the other hand, given the current “F” ranking of Wisconsin’s science standards by the Thomas B Fordham Foundation’s 2005 study (Wisconsin ranked 48th of 50), one would think that it would be in our best interests to redouble our efforts to encourage science instruction and ensure that our children have access to quality teachers, materials and resources. These desires are even more heartfelt in an era where the need for technology, engineering and science-related jobs are growing much more rapidly than the number of people capable of filling them! As it is, National Education Standards in Science are being considered ever more seriously and schools are increasingly held accountable for what they may fail to teach our youth. Taking this into consideration, why would we want to spend valuable science education time with discussions of non-existent controversies or quasi-religious explanations for scientific processes?

In last week’s address, the AAAS cautions that there are at least fourteen (14!!!) pending examples of anti-evolution legislation including: Alabama SB 240, Arkansas HB 2607, Georgia HB 179, Kansas SB 168, Michigan HB 5251, Mississippi SB 2286, Missouri HB 1266, New York 8036, Ohio HB 481, Oklahoma HB 2107, Pennsylvania HB 1007, South Carolina SB 909, Texas HB 1447 and Utah SB 96. (Info from the American Association for the Advancement of Science <http://www.aaasmeeting.org/evolution> and Missourians for Excellence in Science Education which is an Intelligent Design advocacy group.)



Enter [Wisconsin State Representative, Terese Berceau](#). In an unprecedented move, she has proactively introduced legislation ([LRB 2463](#)) that “directs school boards to ensure that any material presented as science within the school curriculum is testable as a scientific hypothesis, describes only natural processes, and is consistent with any description or definition of science adopted by the [National Academy of Sciences](#).” It is one of the shortest, clearest Bills out there. It does NOT single out creation or intelligent design. It merely asks our public schools to make certain that only science is taught in science class. This is a progressive and pro-active move to “promote good science education, and prevent the introduction of pseudo-science in the science classroom” according to Rep Berceau. She drafted the legislation with Representative Spencer Black and at least thirteen esteemed faculty members and researchers from the University of Wisconsin.

Taking all of the above into consideration, what do we do with [Wisconsin State Senate Bill 506 \(SB 506\)](#) which has been put forth by Senators [Reynolds](#) and [Lazich](#) and co-sponsored by Representatives [Ott](#), [Hines](#), [Gundrum](#), [Vos](#), [Kleefisch](#) and [Petrowski](#)? Essentially, it seeks to prohibit any textbooks that use BCE or CE (Before Current Era or Current Era) instead of BC and AD (Before Christ and Anno Domini, i.e. year of our Lord)! I suppose for the “little guy” that its fortunate large publishers such as McGraw-Hill and Houghton-Mifflin employ lobbyists and lawyers, in addition to textbook writers, who may not feel comfortable referring to every historical, geological and cultural event in the planet’s history from where it sits with regards to Jesus’ Birthday.

Are these your senators and representatives? Are these your schools? Are these your churches?

- - - Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty - - - please stay active, contact your local representatives and be proactive in discussing the importance of maintaining the separation of church and state.

by Emilio De Torre, Youth and Program Director of the ACLU of Wisconsin Foundation