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Evolution or Intelligent Design? None of the Government's Business

by Sheldon Richman

You'd think that with all he has to do — including fighting the global struggle against violent extremism, or whatever they're calling it this week — President Bush would be too busy to make the really big decisions: such as what ought to be taught in science class. But our renaissance man of a president is apparently up to the task. Does he write poetry after dinner and paint before breakfast?

When asked recently if the view known as “intelligent design” should be taught alongside Darwinian evolution, President Bush said, “I felt like both sides ought to be properly taught. I think that part of education is to expose people to different schools of thought. You're asking me whether or not people ought to be exposed to different ideas, and the answer is yes.”

But this is not an abstract question about the open marketplace of ideas. It is a concrete question about the science curriculum in the government's schools. If Bush can't see those essential details, then maybe he is too busy to be meddling in the issue.

Those of us who think that government has no business “educating” children have long warned that such a role would take government where it ought not to tread. There is no such thing as value-free education, so government control of schools entails government's imparting values to children. Look at the politicians and bureaucrats you are familiar with. Do you want *them* imparting values to your kids? Neither do I.

The present lobbying throughout the states to have “intelligent design” given equal weight with evolution is presented as a matter of fairness. But that's a decoy. It is really an attempt to use government power to define science, and it should offend any advocate of limiting that power.

Government wouldn't be called on to arbitrate disputes about science if it were not running a virtual monopoly on schools. Thus we have another reason for the government to privatize education. The basic reason is that government can't do anything without using physical force against innocent people.

Behold what government control of education has wrought. Science is settled on the idea that evolutionary processes account for the origin of species. There is debate at the margins, but the core theory is well supported. A number of people, however, including some scientists, believe that certain phenomena are too complex to be explained by evolution. Only intelligent design, they say, can explain those things.

I am tempted to state my reasons for casting my lot with the evolutionists — except that it would distract us from the main point, which is that this is none of the government's business. Government schools, because they are compulsorily financed through taxation, turn a debate between science and religion into an acrid political war. How ironic that government schooling was originally touted as the path to social harmony.

In a free, depoliticized educational environment, people would have no need to fight over the origin of species at school-board meetings as they do today. In the current system, if your side doesn't control the curriculum, the other side will, which means it will impose abhorrent views on your children. Since the stakes are so high, people invest a lot of effort to gain or keep control.

But in a free education market no one is threatened. Parents send their children to the schools that best reflect their worldviews. There is no need to fight for power; power is irrelevant. So education proceeds peacefully.

We often distrust simple solutions, but this one is just that simple. Take government out of schooling; return responsibility and financial control to parents — and education will be as private and placid as religious worship is. If we value freedom and social cooperation, we will realize that there is no way to intelligently design a government school system.

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