

Not your daddy's creationists

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SOMETIMES IT seems like secular intellectuals just can't win. In the 1980s and '90s, they were attacked by the right for their "relativism" — an alleged refusal to accept the existence of absolute truth. Today, they're under attack once more, only this time the right is mad because secular intellectuals aren't relativist enough.

At any rate, that appears to be the charge put forward by conservatives who advocate the teaching of so-called intelligent design.

These are not your daddy's creationists. When scientists and other members of the reality-based community declare that evolution is the only valid and provable account of our planet's natural history, intelligent design boosters don't cite the Bible. Instead, they earnestly insist that no one ought to claim a monopoly on truth, and that in the interests of intellectual and moral pluralism, "alternatives" to evolution should get a fair hearing in schools.

This week, Arizona Sen. John McCain became the latest Republican politician to urge that "all points of view" be presented to students studying the origins of life. He joined President Bush and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), who argued recently that intelligent design should be taught alongside evolution because people in "a pluralistic society should have access to a broad range of fact, of science, including faith."

It's the new relativism: when scientific truth can't be squared with your religion or ideology, wax eloquent about the value of pluralism and intellectual diversity.

The new relativism marks quite a shift from the arguments normally employed by the right. Remember the "culture wars" of the late '80s and early '90s, when conservatives in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, such as William Bennett and Lynne Cheney, inveighed against the "relativism" that allegedly dominated the thinking of American intellectuals?

Their critique drew on the work of prominent conservatives in the academy, including the late University of Chicago philosopher Allan Bloom, who condemned multiculturalism, postmodernism and relativism in his influential 1987 book, "The Closing of the American Mind." And, speaking to American students in 1987, Pope John Paul II denounced academic pluralists who think that "ultimate questions about human life and destiny have no final answers or that all beliefs are of equal value."

In the United States, prominent evangelical Christian authors such as Frank Peretti and Chuck Colson also joined the chorus, warning that relativism would undermine American society.

So it's a tad ironic that conservatives and the religious right are now arguing that intelligent design should be taught on the grounds of intellectual pluralism. Needless to say, from the perspective of virtually all reputable scientists, evolution isn't just one theory among many, it's the only scientifically proven account of the origin and development of life on Earth. Denying evolution isn't merely "another perspective." It's like insisting that the sun revolves around the Earth, or that the moon is inhabited by little green guys. Whatever happened to truth?

Of course, maybe we secular types are wrong to keep resisting the right's new relativism. What would happen if we embraced it? Sure, we'd have to tolerate a lot of claptrap about intelligent

design in the classroom, but think of the potential benefits.

If the right is sincerely dedicated to supporting pluralism and openness, surely they'd have no further objection to sex education classes that urge condom use, for instance, as long as abstinence-only arguments get equal time. And presumably they wouldn't mind if teachers tell kids that homosexuality is a legitimate form of human behavior, as long as teachers also explain that some people consider it a sin. Nor would conservatives have any basis to object to education about abortion rights, as long as their perspective is also represented.

Granted, there are problems with this approach. For one thing, the school year would need to be lengthened to accommodate all the new curricular material. Because if intelligent design must be taught just because a few crackpot scientists are on board with it, we'll also have to teach about the UFO landings at Roswell and the numerous Elvis sightings that occur each year.

We also would have to brace ourselves for the long-term consequences of the free-for-all ushered in by the right's new relativism: the hospitals that would guarantee equal employment opportunities to faith-based cardiac surgeons who eschew anatomy classes for prayer, and the airlines that would allow faith-based aeronautics to replace modern physics during the design phase of their aircraft.

Never mind. For now, I'm going to stick with old-fashioned thinking. At least when it comes to science, there is such a thing as absolute truth.

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