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“Both Wrong and Dangerous” — Scientists Have Worldviews, Too.

The modern world does not exist without science and technology, but science does not rule the world. In a democracy — especially a democracy governed by the First Amendment — a healthy debate on all these issues will reach virtually every American institution, including the public schools. School boards and legislatures are answerable to the people — not to a regime of scientists.

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Charles C. Haynes, Senior Scholar at the First Amendment Center in Washington, warns that America needs to strengthen its science education programs, since “American students rank an abysmal 21st in scientific literacy when compared to students around the world.” In a recent column, Haynes then lamented the fact that several state legislatures are “muddying the science-education waters” by calling for the schools to “teach the controversy” when it comes to issues like climate change and evolution.



Haynes cites an article in *The New York Times* in which Leslie Kaufman reported: “Critics of the teaching of evolution in the nation’s classrooms are gaining ground in some states by linking the issue to global warming, arguing that dissenting views on both scientific subjects should be taught in public schools.”

Haynes then responds: “At first blush, who can possibly object? After all, intellectual freedom should be the cornerstone of a good education in a democratic society. Of course students should be taught to be critical thinkers. Of course they should be exposed to legitimate scientific questions and debates in science classes.”

He then asks: “But are these bills really about academic freedom — or are they driven by politics and religion?”

He answers his own question when he proceeds to argue that scientists alone can determine the scientific debate. “Genuine academic freedom means exposing students to how *scientists* determine what is and isn’t controversial in science — and then helping students understand how the scientific method is used to resolve unanswered questions about any and all scientific theories,” Haynes insists. “Scientists and science educators should decide what our kids need to learn about science, not legislators or religious advocacy groups.”

Thus, scientists alone can tell us what is and is not controversial or debatable. The call to “teach all sides” can only be passed to the scientists, who can tell us what the sides are. If there are credible scientific alternatives, these must be “peer-reviewed in science journals before being presented as science in public schools.” The public schools, he insists, should not be a battleground for ideological warfare.

Charles C. Haynes watches these issues closely, and he generally appears on the public scene as a voice of reason and thoughtful analysis. In this column, he insists that Americans have a First Amendment right “to wage ideological warfare against evolution or any other scientific theory.” But, to make the public schools the focus of such battles is “both wrong and dangerous.”

And yet, there is a far more dangerous assumption lurking underneath Haynes' argument. Like so many others, he seems to assume that the world of science is a sanitized and self-regulating world of pristine knowledge. This conception of modern science has been fostered by the culture at large, but science is no such thing.

While the scientific method has brought incalculable gifts to human life and understanding, science is a human activity conducted within a human cultural context. It is never free from ideological influence or political complexities. Science is largely funded by governments, and nothing is apolitical when it comes to government funding. Scientific work is most commonly conducted within the context of the modern research university and similar academic centers — all highly ideological and politically charged.

Alternative theories or arguments must be “peer-reviewed in science journals?” Tell that to the scientists who have questioned the supposed consensus on climate change, whose access to peer-reviewed journals has been, we now know, blocked by supposedly “neutral” peer reviewers. The science of climate change, based on retrospective extrapolations and complex computer models, depends on thousands of assumptions — none free from ideological factors or political implications. It does not serve society well to present this body of observational and theoretical work as free of ideology and politics — and it is patently unfair to charge all who question this body of work as driven by . . . nothing more than ideology and politics.

When it comes to evolutionary science, the same issues present themselves — and have since the dawn of the controversy. Once again, there is no non-ideological science, and there is no shortage of political implications. What drives so many policy makers and observers to distraction is the fact that Americans in general — and American parents in particular — just do not accept evolution as an adequate account of the cosmos. And, as time has shown, Americans are highly resistant to being told that they must accept what the scientific establishment insists is the only legitimate worldview.

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Science is a cultural product that inevitably reflects the society it serves. This can be as breathtakingly impressive as the NASA missions to the moon, or as morally reprehensible as the Nazi medical experiments. Modern cultures cannot exist without modern science, but science is not the non-ideological and non-political world of knowledge many presume it to be. That presumption, to borrow Charles Haynes' words, is “both wrong and dangerous.”

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

Charles C. Haynes, “[When Politics and Religion Trump Science, Education Suffers](#),” The First Amendment Center, March 14, 2010. Published in *The Courier-Journal* [Louisville, Kentucky], Wednesday, March 17, 2010.

Leslie Kaufman, “[Darwin Foes Add Warming to Targets](#),” *The New York Times*, Wednesday, March 3, 2010.

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