

Scientists enlist clergy in evolution battle

Monday, February 20, 2006

ST. LOUIS, Missouri (Reuters) -- American scientists fighting back against creationism, intelligent design and other theories that seek to deny or downgrade the importance of evolution have recruited unlikely allies -- the clergy. And they have taken their battle to a new level, trying to educate high school and even elementary school teachers on how to hold their own against parents and school boards who want to mix religion with science.



While they feel they have won the latest round against efforts to bring God into the classroom, the scientists say they have little doubt their opponents are merely regrouping. "It's time to recognize that science and religion should never be pitted against one another," American Association for the Advancement of Science President Gilbert Omenn told a news conference on Sunday. The AAAS has held several sessions on the evolution issue at its annual meeting in St. Louis. "The faith community needs to step up to the plate," agreed Eugenie Scott, Executive Director, National Center for Science Education in Oakland, California. Scott said many people held the "toxic" idea that "you are either a Christian creationist or you are a bad-guy atheist".

Recent court and electoral battles have made clear that judges and voters will reject efforts to sneak creationism into the classroom under the guise of making a scientific curriculum clearer or fairer, Scott said. By a vote of 11 to 4, the Ohio Board of Education last week pulled a model lesson plan it had approved in 2004. The plan had permitted science teachers to encourage students to look at questions about evolution, something proponents of "intelligent design" call "teaching the controversy." Last year in Pennsylvania, a federal court ruled the theory could not be taught in a public school and the school board in Dover, Pennsylvania, which approved the teaching, was voted out.

Intelligent design proponents see the hand of God behind evolution because, they say, life is too complex to be random.

"As a legal strategy intelligent design is dead. It will be very difficult for any school district in the future to successfully survive a legal challenge," Scott said. "That doesn't mean intelligent design is dead as a very popular social movement. This is an idea that has got legs."

But pastors are speaking out against it. Warren Eschbach, a retired Church of the Brethren pastor and professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania helped sponsor a letter signed by more than 10,000 other clergy. "We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests," they wrote.

Catholic experts have also joined the movement. "The intelligent design movement belittles God. It makes God a designer, an engineer," said Vatican Observatory Director George Coyne, an astrophysicist who is also ordained. "The God of religious faith is a god of love. He did not design me."

Gerry Wheeler, executive director of the National Science Teachers Association said some teachers feared losing their jobs if they taught evolution. "The pressures come from the students and the parents," he said.