

Comment

Not all Americans are creationists. Not all creationists are American

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In addition to their intrusive presence in American schools, creationists - or more modern epigones thereof, known as “intelligent designers” - are also and unexpectedly to be found in other countries. Take the United Kingdom as an example. Over the past few years, Darwin’s homeland has actually been witnessing attempts to introduce literal faith in the Bible into school programmes in a way which does not significantly differ from the one adopted in the United States. It is multi-billionaire Howard H. Ahmanson who generously finances the Discovery Institute across the Atlantic, one of the dissemination centres of the creationist “creed”.

In the same way, car retailer and multi-billionaire Peter Vardy influences school teaching in the United Kingdom, but with a different strategy. Since schools are accountable for their curricula, Vardy has founded various secondary schools where, together with the theory of evolution, students are taught creationism in all its aspects, from the literal interpretation of the Bible to *intelligent design*. The Emmanuel Schools Foundation, headed by Sir Vardy, takes advantage of a law passed by the Labour government whereby private individuals can partly sponsor the establishment of new schools and, at the same time, control curricula. Three secondary schools have been established by the Emmanuel Foundation so far and plans exist to “enter” some new ones. The British Humanist Association, established with the aim of “promoting humanism and representing people wanting to live without religion or superstitious beliefs”, is backed by both the law and Prime Minister Tony Blair himself, who stated in parliament: “It would be very unfortunate if concerns about that issue were seen to remove the very strong incentive to ensure that we get as diverse a school system as we properly can”. Prime Minister Blair, who attended the inauguration ceremony of one of the Emmanuel Foundation’s schools, is supposed to have been attempting to persuade other schools into accepting influence from Vardy’s foundation. Even though his efforts are certainly considerable, Vardy is not the only one defending creationism. According to *Guardian* newspaper, some Christian and Islamic fundamentalist medical students have expressed strong opposition to the teaching of Darwinism in England.

Early last February, for instance, booklets produced by the Al-Nasr Trust, an organisation aiming at improving understanding of Islam, were handed out within the framework of the “Islam Awareness Week” at the Guys Hospital, King’s College, London, denouncing the false nature of Darwin’s theories. At another university some students failed their exams for describing creationism as a fact, while early last March a bill was put forward allegedly forcing students to study creationism as an alternative to the theory of evolution. They are supposed to discuss “how fossil documentation has been interpreted in different ways over the centuries, e.g. from a creationist perspective.” When enquired about the teaching of creationism, former Minister for School Standards Jacqueline Smith responded that students should learn “how scientific controversies result from different interpretations of empirical evidence”. She subsequently recanted.

All British scientists intervened against this stance, first and foremost Richard Dawkins, who interpreted these moves as the ultimate demonstration of how religion aims at controlling students’ minds. James Williams, science course leader at Sussex University’s School of Education said: “This is not science, it is not recognised by the scientific community and to legitimise it like this is wrong.” Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury and top authority in the Anglican Church stated that creationism should not be taught because it is “a kind of category mistake, as if the Bible were a theory like other theories”.

In other countries of the world the debate between creationism and theory of evolution is not as heated as in the United States or in the United Kingdom. In Serbia, however, the former Minister of Education Ljiljana Čolić attempted to teach Darwinism alongside creationism, claiming that “Darwin’s theory is no more legitimate than the idea that God created all creatures in the world. They are both dogmatic”. This proposal caused a considerable amount of controversy and led to her resignation. In the Netherlands Maria van der Hoeven, Minister of Education, Culture and Science, attempted to launch a debate between scientists and creationists. The conclusions of this debate were to be introduced into school curricula. Minister Van der Hoeven claimed that she does “not believe in coincidence” and that the theory of evolution is “not complete”. Representatives of other parties - including her own - immediately retorted. As Mr Balemans, member of parliament for the VVD, the Dutch Liberal party, pointed out: “Parties are not interested in a Minister taking us back to the 1950s”. These attempts are probably extempore *trial balloons* of some politicians, just as it occurred in Australia, where Federal Minister of Education Brendan Nelson stated that if parents wanted to, they should have a choice about whether kids are taught the theory of evolution or that of intelligent design. Everything began when the group Campus Crusade for Christ presented MP Nelson with an American DVD produced by a creationist group entitled “Revealing the Secrets of Life”. To be completely honest Nelson proposed that intelligent design be taught during religion classes, but the group “Focus on Family” demanded that it should be taught during science classes. Australian scientists vehemently opposed the idea and 70,000 of them sent a letter of condemnation to the major Australian newspapers against the Minister’s proposal on 21st October 2005. Few days earlier, however, the Pacific Hills Christian School in New South Wales had announced beginning to teach intelligent design at science classes. Groups urging that students be taught intelligent design are quite numerous in Australia. Ken Ham is also from Australia and he is one of the most popular Young Earth Creationists, a group believing that the Earth is not older than 6000 years.

The last and maybe most interesting example can be drawn from a country whose cultural substratum is perhaps even more hostile to the theory of evolution than any other, i.e. Turkey. The secularisation of the country by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s brought about an open approach to science, thus allowing an Islamic country become acquainted with Darwin’s theories. Following the example of some American research “institutes”, the Turkish Science Research Foundation (BAV) undertook the mission of spreading the Islamic version of scientific creationism in the early 1990s. The atmosphere of reformation and the literal interpretation of the Koran applied to natural sciences certainly helped. As Ümit Sayin and Aykut Kence stated in an article published in the research journal of the US National Center for Science Education, the theory of evolution was present in school books, but was described in a ridiculous way, thus making it very easy for religion teachers to discredit it. Various legal actions were taken, including a “Bill against evolution” put forward by the fundamentalist Party of Virtue, which was geared to eliminate all the books dealing with the theory of evolution.

Yet, books published by the BAV, usually issued under the name Harun Yahya, urged some Turkish science organisations like TÜBİTAK, the Turkish Council for Technical and Scientific Research and the Turkish Science Academy, to respond to the fundamentalist threat. The same authors mentioned above set up a Committee in 1998 to demolish Harun Yahya’s false statements. As a reaction the BAV launched a frontal attack on the Turkish scientific establishment defining advocates of the theory of evolution as communists, Maoists and atheists. In the wake of a fierce campaign against Turkish scientists that reached its peak in the publication of pictures of members of the Science Academy’s committee, the BAV was blocked by Ankara’s Third Civil Court and fined \$ 6,000 for moral damages to the scientists.

Translated by Quickline

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