

Theocracy Alert

Evolution and the Horowitz plan: Using “diversity” and “academic freedom” to destroy knowledge and education

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July 16, 2005—By now every well informed person is aware of the efforts—and successes—of the Christian Right and their ideological-political brethren to remake public education in their own image.

The most obvious examples are the efforts to replace science with religion, to replace evolution—a scientific fact based on extensive real-world research complemented by museums and libraries filled with hard, empirical evidence—with “creationism,” which has as its sole evidence the Genesis myth in the Bible. But the debate is really not about science. It’s about politics, ultra-conservative theocratic politics to be precise.

In her June 21, 2005 [article](#), “Opting Out in the Debate on Evolution,” Cornelia Dean made the case: “When the Kansas State Board of Education decided to hold hearings this spring on what the state’s schoolchildren should be taught about evolution, Dr. Kenneth R. Miller was invited to testify. Lots of people thought he was a good choice to speak for science.” Dr. Miller is “professor of biology at Brown University, a co-author of widely used high school and college biology texts, an ardent advocate of the teaching of evolution—and a person of faith.”

But Dr. Miller and other reputable scientists refused to participate in the hearings. Why? For two reasons: “that the outcome of the hearings was a foregone conclusion, and that participating in them would only strengthen the idea in some minds that there was a serious debate in science about the power of the theory of evolution.” As the director of the National Center for Science Education Eugenie Scott put it, “We on the science side of things strong-armed the Kansas hearings because we realized this was not a scientific exchange. It was a political show trial.”

This is where “diversity” comes into play in the form of “teach the controversy” about evolution even though there is no *scientific* controversy, only a religious-political one. Mainstream scientists have repeatedly demonstrated that creationism—and its latest incarnation, “intelligent design”—fail to meet the criteria that define “science.” Nevertheless, the “diversity” argument goes something like this: since there are alternative faith-based theories to evolution, teach them and let the students decide. Aren’t students in science class supposed to learn what science *is*, not redefine it as they wish?

But “diversity” isn’t always a good thing for the Christian Right and America’s conservative movement. Their leaders have been beating the drums of intolerance against any program or club that fosters it. The ceaseless attacks on the [Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network](#) are a prime example. Another prime example comes from the White County schools in northwest Georgia. Public school officials there [decided](#) to eliminate *all* clubs in order to avoid having a gay-straight club meant to foster diversity and understanding. (That’s “understanding” as in “education.”)

In justifying this bizarre action, superintendent Paul Shaw said that “clubs have not lived up to what they are supposed to be doing, and the legislature is requiring that we do additional paperwork and things of that sort. Plus, we want to focus on academics this coming school year.”

“Academics?” How does superintendent Shaw define that? Shouldn’t “academics” teach knowledge and foster understanding rather than reinforce religious bigotry?

A March 2005 study about college professors sparked the next wave of the assault on education. Joyce Howard Price’s [article](#), “Study finds liberals dominate faculties,” in The Washington Times explained: “Nearly three-quarters of faculty members at U.S. colleges and universities describe themselves as liberals, and at elite schools, the proportion is 87 percent, a survey has found.”

Having had some success bullying teachers and redefining “knowledge,” “science” and “education” in the public schools, college and university professors now became targets. The current campaign is spearheaded by David Horowitz’s group and their [Academic Bill of Rights](#) and [Students for Academic Freedom](#) campaigns, both of which are featured on their [web site](#). They claim both efforts are in the name of “diversity,” but examine their web site, especially the ad for [Conservative T-Shirts](#).

The [diversity](#) T-shirt features four rows depicting 18 handguns over the logo “Celebrate Diversity.” The word “diversity” is in yellow, except on the [“alternative version available”](#) where it’s in a *rainbow* of red, yellow and green. A less than subtle “kill gays” message? How do Horowitz and his group have the nerve to say they’re concerned about students, faculty and education?

But in the current political climate, his subterfuge is spreading (as is the T-shirt ad which now appears on a number of conservative sites, including [townhall.com](#)). Pennsylvania’s House of Representatives was the latest to jump on the bandwagon. On July 5, the Republican-dominated House passed a resolution that stated, in part, “students *and faculty* should be protected from the imposition of ideological orthodoxy” (italics mine). The resolution was based on the Horowitz group’s “Academic Bill of Rights.”

Gibson Armstrong, the Republican legislator who proposed the Pennsylvania resolution, said he has 50 examples of “intolerance” from college students. Intolerance has no place in the open pursuit of knowledge—a lesson the Christian Right and their allies desperately need to learn—but 50 *alleged* examples is hardly an avalanche, given the numbers. As of fall 2004, the state reported 660,566 students enrolled in Pennsylvania colleges and universities.

Bill Toland of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette’s Harrisburg Bureau was correct: “critics of proposals like these say political conservatives, emboldened by election successes over the past decade, are making a thinly veiled charge at the last bastion of liberalism—college campuses—armed with flimsy evidence and in search of a problem that doesn’t really exist.”

What neither Horowitz nor Armstrong bother to explain is that at virtually every college and university in this country, students already have myriad ways and means of addressing a grade or classroom treatment they deemed unfair. Such procedures exist at the department and/or division levels, as well as the college and/or university levels. At virtually every college and university in this country, at the end of the semester students fill out anonymous “evaluation” forms on the course and its instructor. The results are reviewed and acted upon by administrators at all levels.

What Mr. Horowitz and Rep. Armstrong are really doing is encouraging fundamentalists and ultra-conservative students to strike at anyone who disagrees with their views.

Horowitz’s propaganda, like the Pennsylvania resolution, claims to want to “protect student and faculty,” but nothing in their materials seems to address protecting faculty. I know—from firsthand experience and talking with colleagues nationwide—that more than a few of us have been confronted by students who thought anything “the professor” said that in *any* way contradicted their religious beliefs and biblical worldview was a condescending, personal attack on them and an egregious affront to their “religious freedom.” I also know we’ve had students of deep religious faith and strong political views who engaged in diverse discussions and taught as much as they learned. *That’s* the real essence of diversity, academic freedom and education.

“Students for Academic Freedom” says its goal is to “end the political abuse of the university and to restore integrity to the academic mission as a disinterested pursuit of knowledge.” But “disinterested” is definitely *not* a word I would apply—or want to apply—to the desire to learn or to the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Doing so kills desire, debases knowledge, and makes truth irrelevant.

As for Horowitz and his group’s advertising of those conservative T-shirts, what would they say to an African-American, Latino or Asian professor if a “student for academic freedom” showed up in class wearing the “diversity” T-shirt?

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