

Opinion

Posted on Sun, Jul. 30, 2006

No conflict between science and religion

BY GILBERT S. OMENN AND ALAN I. LESHNER

In the climate of turmoil that now surrounds how biology and evolution are taught in public schools, a troubling distortion has become common: The issues are wrongly cast as a conflict between science and religion, as if they were two rival football teams.

With a crucial State Board of Education election just days away, and with the long-term future of Kansas children at stake, it's important to avoid such misunderstanding.

Science has no inherent conflict with religion and no interest in trying to undermine faith.

Science seeks natural explanations of the natural world, focusing on how the Earth and life developed over millions of years. Religion deals with questions of the supernatural and the ultimate meanings of life, totally different domains. Many scientists are religious, and thousands of U.S. clerical leaders from every denomination have testified that they see no conflict between faith and evolution.

Certainly some scientists do publicly reject religion, and some religious figures encourage mistrust of science. But if extremists dominate the discussion, misunderstanding thrives, to the detriment of everyone.

In recent years, a small but vocal religious group has made a mission of advocating that creationism or its modern cousin, intelligent design, be presented as a scientific theory alongside evolution. Teach the controversy, they say, alluding to the American sense of fair play.

The trouble is, there is no such controversy.

The scientific evidence for evolution is vast and thoroughly tested -- in fossils, genetic analysis and thousands of other studies. On the other hand, leaders of the intelligent design movement insist on their commitment to science, but they have no scientific evidence and have published virtually nothing in scientific journals. U.S. District Judge John E. Jones III rejected their arguments in Pennsylvania last year.

This issue divides us at a time when we need to come together to preserve our nation's status as the world's powerhouse of innovation. There is great concern in every quarter about the decline of U.S. math and science education.

America faces unprecedented science-related challenges -- to protect our national security, to find new energy sources, and to defend against diseases such as avian flu. If we undermine science education, we put the people of Kansas and the United States at risk.

What's needed is a commitment to mutual respect. Religion is a personal matter, and it should be taught in the home and in churches and synagogues.

But science classrooms are where we cultivate the mind-set of discovery and where we prepare the workers of tomorrow. Those classrooms must be reserved for science.

Rather than confuse students, we need to teach science better than ever to inspire a new generation and secure our nation's future.

Gilbert S. Omenn is chairman of the board of the D.C.-based American Association for the Advancement of Science and a professor of medicine, genetics and public health at the University of Michigan. Alan I. Leshner is chief executive of AAAS and executive publisher of its journal, Science.