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OPINION

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It's Not the Scopes Monkey Trial II

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Though some people have compared the intelligent design case in federal court in Pennsylvania to the famous 1925 trial of Tennessee biology teacher John Scopes, it would be a mistake to cast it as the science vs. religion Super Bowl.

This spin heightens the drama, but it is a misrepresentation, obscuring the real conflict.

To understand the deeper nature of this controversy, consider the nature of science. Scientists seek natural explanations for natural events.

Findings are not accepted as fact unless other scientists can reproduce them.

Religion, by comparison, is based on faith, not fact in the scientific sense. Many scientists are spiritual and guided in life by their faith. But their religious beliefs should never distort their scientific work.

The leaders of the intelligent design movement reverse the scientific process: They begin with their conclusion and manipulate science to suit their purpose.

Their 1999 "Wedge Document" makes the true goal clear: "Design theory promises to reverse the stifling dominance of the materialist world view, and to replace it with a science consonant with Christian and theistic convictions."

Leaders of the intelligent design movement rightly point to gaps in our scientific understanding of evolution. Our understanding of disease, the cli-

mate and distant galaxies is incomplete, too. That's the nature of current human knowledge, and it is the job of science to close the gaps.

ID advocates claim there are life systems that are "irreducibly complex," and therefore must be evidence of an intelligent designer.

What does this really mean? Not so long ago, our ancestors were certain that the Earth was flat, motor-powered flight was a fantasy, and cancer was untreatable. The way the immune system works was seen as an unsolvable mystery.

Science has helped close those gaps and expand knowledge. Today's irreducible complexity is tomorrow's clear scientific explanation.

Despite their professed devotion to science, ID advocates have published nothing in mainstream, peer-reviewed journals. Their allies in the sciences are few, and mostly fringe players. When their arguments were submitted for scientific review in Kansas, they were rejected outright.

Finding a few scientists who endorse a belief does not make it science. Even the movement's promise to seek a more theocratic science is misleading. The movement represents only one radical faction of Christianity, and a small segment of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus.

Many religious people from a broad spectrum of religions and denominations accept evolution, seeing no conflict with their faith. Pope John Paul II told the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1996 that evidence supports evolution.

Last year, when a school board in Grantsburg, Wis., tried to undermine

evolution by ordering that all students be able to "explain the strengths and weaknesses of evolutionary theory," nearly 200 of the state's religious leaders signed a letter of protest. Their campaign has since gone national.

More than 7,500 U.S. ministers, rabbis, priests, nuns and other clerics have signed a letter affirming the belief "that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist."

Leaders of the ID movement have neither science nor mainstream religion on their side. They have manufactured a controversy in hopes of subverting science to the rule of their sect.

The controversy is social, not scientific, and as such it is more appropriate for discussion in social studies or philosophy classes.

If the ID campaign is successful in court, it will lead the nation down a dangerous, slippery slope. If science classrooms are opened to their teaching, fairness requires that the views of countless other religions and denominations be taught as well.

This would make a hash of science education, confusing our students and undermining the process of objective scientific research that has brought so much benefit to so many people.

The ID movement is not science, and it has no place in science classrooms. We are confident that as this matter is evaluated in Pennsylvania, evidence — and the lack of evidence — will decide the case.

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