

A conflict lies in where moral values come from and how they are taught in the schools

Last Thursday night after I finally got done studying for a baffling astronomy quiz. I opened up a book I was reading about spirituality. There was a chapter on creation that looked interesting.

I enjoy reading, but not if I have to read the chapters in order. I was not aware of page numbers until I started college. Anyway, I was amazed to find that despite my efforts to wind down my day, I was still studying for my astronomy quiz.

The quiz was on cosmology. We had been discussing the origin, history, structure, and future of the universe for a couple of weeks, and I was lost in the details with little appreciation for the significance of the topic.

Chapter five of *The River of Light*, by Lawrence Kushner had me once again reading about galaxies, redshifts, Edwin Hubble, the expansion of the universe, and microwave background noise. I was sort of expecting something more like a discussion of the poetic vs. historic Genesis. Kushner is a well-respected clergyman.

Here I was reading one of his celebrated works on spirituality only to find myself learning about scientific discoveries of this century. Finally I had allowed someone to take off the blindfold I had been wearing for so long. It has dawned on me that science and religion are not opposites. The two have different goals but they deal with many of the same subjects.

This provides some new perspectives on the separation of church and state and the public school system. Look at the current battles over the teaching of evolution but not creation in the public school system.



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One side claims to be upholding the separation of church and state as dictated by the First Amendment. The other side wants the story of creation, as it appears in Genesis, to be taught to all children. The latter is using two approaches to change the status quo:

- "creation science" — an attempt to promote religion as a science.
- "secular humanist religion" — pointing out that secular society promotes a definite value system and is thus as much a religion as Judaism or Christianity.

I tend to think that in a society which supposedly guarantees religious freedom to everyone, it is important to keep

government as far away from religion as possible. The flip side of this is that in a government "... of the people..." it would be both stupid and futile to try to keep religion away from government.

In other words, I think it is good for people to be directed by their spiritual values but dangerous to give them the opportunity to impose their beliefs on others. This is not a clear-cut situation. Is it protection or oppression to prevent children from organized prayer during the school day? Separation of church and state is enormously important, but it does create certain problems.

Getting back to the evolution / creation issue, I think the fundamentalists have a point when they call secular humanism a religion.

While I would certainly not agree with this label, I do recognize that the public school system tries to impress a value system on young students. This is an important part of a child's education. It should be. No one can be expected to develop a code of behavior without some guidance.

The conflict lies in where the values come from and how they are being taught. Unfortunately we have become so involved with labels that we are neglecting the values themselves.

If a system of morals and right behavior is not among the implied curricula of the

public schools, then we have defeated ourselves. Knowledge itself, as I discovered with my astronomy quiz, is very cold unless it is coupled with an appreciation for humanity and its world.

So we are saying that it is OK, even good to promote ethical beliefs in the public school system, but not religion. This may sound hypocritical until you consider the possibility that science is an entity in harmony with religion. I am using the term science to include all of the systematic secular disciplines commonly taught in primary and secondary schools.

Religion and science are very different, but they do not exclude or contradict one another if viewed as they are intended to be. The nature of religious thinking is subjective even when it would be easier to handle objective rules alone.

Science is an attempt to view our world through neutral eyes, carefully avoiding the temptation to interpret empirical evidence according to personal beliefs. Since both fall short of their goals, science and religion are quite complimentary.

Are values implied through "objective learning"? Of course. Values are expressed in everything we do. The things a secular school system teaches need not be considered in conflict with religious values. Even when a topic like cosmology is taught, religion and science are not necessarily at odds.

A careful consideration of evolution leaves one still having a lot of whys. Genesis provides a poetic response to many of the whys mankind asks, even in today's scientific world. Genesis was never intended to be a science book. The creationists are trying to convert it into just that.

There is no humanist plot. Just an honest attempt to provide people with information and to help them appreciate the world we live in. There are values that we all accept (though we don't always act on them). Teaching these ideals to children does not impose a religion on them.

Keeping religion out of public schools does not mean keeping morality out.

The concept of separation of church and state deserves careful consideration. America wrestles with this constantly.

What do we do with the Seventh-Day Adventist who was denied unemployment compensation because he would not look for work on Saturday? The courts have to choose. Either discriminate against him or allow him special privileges because of his religion. It gets very sticky. America is still lacking a system that neither promotes nor hinders any religious ideal or group.

Todd J. Sukol is a sophomore majoring in journalism, and is a columnist for *The Daily Collegian*.

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