Identity, Access, and Innovation

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Evolution vs Creationism

“The alteration of that legal regime [religion in schools] is one of the most notable constitutional shifts of the past two decades” (Minow, pg. 85). In recent years, religion in schooling has been a hot topic. Opinions are very divided on how inclusive, if at all, religion should be in schools. Numerous Supreme Court cases have emerged as a result, specifically on evolutionism and creationism and how each should be taught. These cases have had great impact on school curriculum and the social aspect within schools. I am personally coming from a religious perspective, being that I am a Christian and believe in creationism, but do my best in making my opinions as impartial as possible. Although evolutionism is taught in schools and creationism is banned, is this really in the best interest of all students?

The Supreme Court case of Epperson v Arkansas in 1968 was a monumental one. This case overturned an Arkansas law that banned the teaching of human evolution in schools, thus allowing evolution to be taught. According to the Establishment Clause of the first amendment it is unconstitutional for a state to require the “teaching and learning…tailored to the principles or prohibitions of any religious sect or dogma.” This means that congress cannot make a law respecting an establishment of a religion. Epperson v Arkansas was one of the first cases that led to the separation of church and state.

Following the Epperson v Arkansas case, some jurisdictions passed laws that said creation science must be taught in addition to evolution, however these were later ruled unconstitutional in the Supreme Court case Edwards v Aguillard of 1987. In this decision creation science was banned from being taught in public schools. Again the reasoning behind this ruling was that the teaching of creation science is unconstitutional and enforcing this teaching is specifically advancing a certain religion. This was another case that had an enormous impact on the separation of church and state. After Edwards v Aguillard, the textbook ‘Of Pandas and People’ was created in order to still teach creationism and attack evolutionists. This book was later banned.

Another related and landmark Supreme Court decision was Kitzmiller v Dover in which it was established that creationism and intelligent design were religious teachings and not areas of legitimate scientific research. This case discredited creationism as scientifically accurate. I personally understand the separation of church and state, because the joining of the two can lead to a lot of conflict and strife due to differing beliefs. Not everyone believes in the same God, if they believe in one at all. However, I do not see why creationism cannot be taught from a historical perspective or a theological perspective. There has been some truth found in the creationist theory and some Biblical stories in general. I believe this truth validates creationism, and thus it should be taught. Evolution is taught as a theory in schools, so I do not see why creationism cannot be taught as purely a theory as well. If this is the case for evolution, why can’t the same be done for creationism? Creationism could very well be taught as a possible belief rather than truth.

The previously mentioned Supreme Court cases aim to impact all public school students, independent of their religious beliefs. These decisions were made with families who do not believe in creationism/non-religious families in mind. On one hand, the cases prevent students whom are not religious from learning about creationism, which is obviously based on religious principles. It does not force students to learn something they do not believe in. On the other hand, these court decisions prevent students from learning about the multiple perspectives there are regarding how the world was created. Diversity learning is prohibited. Epperson v Arkansas and Edwards v Aguillard decisions also effect students’ families. If creationism is not taught in school but a student’s family wants the child to know this theory, the family now has to teach creationism themselves. These creationism and evolutionism related Supreme Court cases shift how religion is taught in the educational playing field.

A tremendous negative effect I foresee as a result of the Epperson v Arkansas and Edwards v Aguillard cases is the possible un-comfortability of religious children. It is well known by all that religion is not allowed in schools. This can leave children who are religious feeling like outsiders, like what they believe in is wrong. A prime, real life example is when a four year old cousin of mine was told she could not say grace before her lunch. She was not asking others to join and said it quietly to herself, so was very confused when she was told by her teacher to stop. She then went home to tell her parents of the experience and asked very confusingly why saying grace was not okay. This little girl felt as if she had done something wrong and uncomfortable. Laws ruling out religion look at the comfortability of some versus the comfortability of all. Some people will be comfortable with only evolution being taught in schools because they are not religious, but it also puts others in an uncomfortable position. In order to make everyone comfortable, again I think a good compromise would be to teach both evolution and creationism as theories.

If a family wants their child to learn creationism or have religion as a part of the child’s education, it can sometimes be very difficult. Michael McConnell, an advocate for equal treatment of religion and individuals seeking religious schooling, stated that some families do not always have access to private and religious schooling. Therefor the families who want their children to attend schools with a religious basis are not able to do so. Due to economic trends, African-American and Latino families typically do not have the finances to attend private school. Therefor these children are not given the chance to incorporate religion into their schooling. This significantly limits students’ access.

In Martha Minow’s *In Brown’s Wake: Legacies of America’s Educational Landmark* she describes a possible compromise, similar to one I mentioned earlier: “specific accommodation of religious students in public school facilities and programs make public schools more hospitable for them” (Minow, pg. 90). Religious student accommodations and programs would increase the welcoming feelings for all students. I understand the perspective that students can learn religion outside of school, but schooling comprises most of a student’s day, eight hours to be specific. In addition, schooling is the basis of a child’s learning. Most of what a child learns is in school.

Continuing with the idea of access being denied by the ban of religion in schooling, I think of the specific situations in which religion is actually suppressed. For example, religion is taken into consideration for holidays, such as Christmas. Christmas historically is the celebration of Jesus Christ’s birth. While other elements have been added over the years, such as Santa Clause, it has historically been a religious holiday. This holiday is still celebrated in schools nationwide. Even if Christmas is celebrated without the mention of Christianity, again it is still a traditional religious holiday. I personally feel that schools decide to accept or celebrate religion when it is convenient or to their advantage.

In Martha Minow’s *In Brown’s Wake* she directly addresses my above concern on religious holidays in schools: “In recent years, given shifts in Supreme Court treatment of religion in public spaces, schools have been allowed to introduce symbols of religious holidays as long as there is evenhanded treatment of different religions” (Minow, pg. 85). Minow speaks on how over the years there has been a softening on the separation of church and state. She writes some on Michael McConnell who was a principal architect for equal treatment. McConnell helped a religious newspaper receive funding from their state university. His stance to the court was that it would be illegal and discriminatory for a public school to deny space to a religious after-school program. He aimed for the Supreme Court to explore diversity and plurality. McConnell was genius in that he reframed the issue as equal protection instead of freedom of speech, leading to his ultimate win.

This case by Michael McConnell was similar to Widmar v Vincent which allowed for equal treatment and inclusion of religious groups in public school settings. Minow states “however refusing access to a group because of its religious identity or message would violate the free speech clause by disfavoring one message or viewpoint” (Minow, pg. 86). She also mentions the Equal Access Act in which religious groups were given access to public school facilities to hold meetings or to gather. Minow gave a great history of the laws concerning religion in schools.

Martha Minow also relates religion in schools to the historical Brown v Board case. She felt that because of this case’s impact, there should be more of a multicultural setting in schools:

…shrinks concerns about government establishment or endorsement of religion and in effect brings religious students and their families as a new group into the ranks of groups whose needs must be all considered in the pluralist, multicultural world created by *Brown* and its advocates (Minow, pg. 86)

Minow states that because Brown v Board had such a great impact on creating a system in which all student needs are evaluated, religious students must be within this group of students whose needs must be examined. Minow also creates an analogy between race and religion. She uses the example that a school would not stop a child from writing a paper on Martin Luther King, Jr. so therefor should not be able to stop a student from writing on religious topics. Minow believes a student should have the right to exercise religion without fear of discrimination. These are all extensions of Brown v Board.

The Epperson v Arkansas and Edwards v Aguillard Supreme Court cases had immense impact because evolutionism teaching was allowed to be taught and the teaching of creationism was banned. These were first steps to the ultimate separation of church and state. I personally do not think the banning of creationism teaching and religion in general is in the best interest of students. Although these cases were decided with the aim to protect the religious interests of all students, their influence can cause a student to feel insecurity about their religion. Embarrassment can be possibly be felt by students if he/she is religious. This also restricts students’ access to religious teachings. While Minow describes the softening of the separation of church and state, there is still a great divide. Ultimately I believe that it would be best for students to learn both creationism and evolutionism as theories, as well as the school’s acceptance of religion.