Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1580 (2007)[1]

The dangers of creationism in education

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The aim of this resolution is not to question or to fight a belief – the right to freedom of belief does not permit that. The aim is to warn against certain tendencies to pass off a belief as science. It is necessary to separate belief from science. It is not a matter of antagonism. Science and belief must be able to coexist. It is not a matter of opposing belief and science, but it is necessary to prevent belief from opposing science.

2. For some people the Creation, as a matter of religious belief, gives a meaning to life. Nevertheless, the Parliamentary Assembly is worried about the possible ill-effects of the spread of creationist ideas within our education systems and about the consequences for our democracies. If we are not careful, creationism could become a threat to human rights, which are a key concern of the Council of Europe.

3. Creationism, born of the denial of the evolution of species through natural selection, was for a long time an almost exclusively American phenomenon. Today creationist ideas are tending to find their way into Europe and their spread is affecting quite a few Council of Europe member states.

4. The prime target of present-day creationists, most of whom are of the Christian or Muslim faith, is education. Creationists are bent on ensuring that their ideas are included in the school science syllabuses. Creationism cannot, however, lay claim to being a scientific discipline.

5. Creationists question the scientific character of certain areas of knowledge and argue that the theory of evolution is only one interpretation among others. They accuse scientists of not providing enough evidence to establish the theory of evolution as scientifically valid. On the contrary, creationists defend their own statements as scientific. None of this stands up to objective analysis.

6. We are witnessing a growth of modes of thought which challenge established knowledge about nature, evolution, our origins and our place in the universe.

7. There is a real risk of serious confusion being introduced into our children's minds between what has to do with convictions, beliefs, ideals of all sorts and what has to do with science. An "all things are equal" attitude may seem appealing and tolerant, but is in fact dangerous.

8. Creationism has many contradictory aspects. The "intelligent design" idea, which is the latest, more refined version of creationism, does not deny a certain degree of evolution. However, intelligent design, presented in a more subtle way, seeks to portray its approach as scientific, and therein lies the danger.

9. The Assembly has constantly insisted that science is of fundamental importance. Science has made possible considerable improvements in living and working conditions and is a rather significant factor in economic, technological and social development. The theory of evolution has nothing to do with divine revelation but is built on facts.

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1. Assembly debate on 4 October 2007 (35th Sitting) (see Doc. Doc. 11375, report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mrs Brasseur). Text adopted by the Assembly on 4 October 2007 (35th Sitting).

10. Creationism claims to be based on scientific rigour. In reality the methods employed by creationists are of three types: purely dogmatic assertions; distorted use of scientific quotations, sometimes illustrated with magnificent photographs; and backing from more or less well-known scientists, most of whom are not specialists in these matters. By these means creationists seek to appeal to non-specialists and spread doubt and confusion in their minds.

11. Evolution is not simply a matter of the evolution of humans and of populations. Denying it could have serious consequences for the development of our societies. Advances in medical research, aiming at combating infectious diseases such as Aids, are impossible if every principle of evolution is denied. One cannot be fully aware of the risks involved in the significant decline in biodiversity and climate change if the mechanisms of evolution are not understood.

12. Our modern world is based on a long history, of which the development of science and technology forms an important part. However, the scientific approach is still not well understood and this is liable to encourage the development of all manner of fundamentalism and extremism. The total rejection of science is definitely one of the most serious threats to human and civic rights.

13. The war on the theory of evolution and on its proponents most often originates in forms of religious extremism closely linked to extreme right-wing political movements. The creationist movements possess real political power. The fact of the matter, and this has been exposed on several occasions, is that some advocates of strict creationism are out to replace democracy by theocracy.

14. All leading representatives of the main monotheistic religions have adopted a much more moderate attitude. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, as his predecessor Pope John-Paul II, today praises the role of science in the evolution of humanity and recognises that the theory of evolution is “more than a hypothesis”.

15. The teaching of all phenomena concerning evolution as a fundamental scientific theory is therefore crucial to the future of our societies and our democracies. For that reason it must occupy a central position in the curriculums, and especially in the science syllabuses, as long as, like any other theory, it is able to stand up to thorough scientific scrutiny. Evolution is present everywhere, from medical overprescription of antibiotics that encourages the emergence of resistant bacteria to agricultural overuse of pesticides that causes insect mutations on which pesticides no longer have any effect.

16. The Council of Europe has highlighted the importance of teaching about culture and religion. In the name of freedom of expression and individual belief, creationist ideas, as any other theological position, could possibly be presented as an addition to cultural and religious education, but they cannot claim scientific respectability.

17. Science provides irreplaceable training in intellectual rigour. It seeks not to explain “why things are” but to understand how they work.

18. Investigation of the creationists’ growing influence shows that the arguments between creationism and evolution go well beyond intellectual debate. If we are not careful, the values that are the very essence of the Council of Europe will be under direct threat from creationist fundamentalists. It is part of the role of the Council of Europe’s parliamentarians to react before it is too late.

19. The Parliamentary Assembly therefore urges the member states, and especially their education authorities to:

19.1. defend and promote scientific knowledge;

19.2. strengthen the teaching of the foundations of science, its history, its epistemology and its methods alongside the teaching of objective scientific knowledge;

19.3. make science more comprehensible, more attractive and closer to the realities of the contemporary world;

19.4. firmly oppose the teaching of creationism as a scientific discipline on an equal footing with the theory of evolution and in general the presentation of creationist ideas in any discipline other than religion;

19.5. promote the teaching of evolution as a fundamental scientific theory in the school curriculums.

20. The Assembly welcomes the fact that 27 academies of science of Council of Europe member states signed, in June 2006, a declaration on the teaching of evolution and calls on academies of science that have not yet done so to sign the declaration.