

EDITORIAL

CLOSED MINDS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Education has been described as the process of driving a set of prejudices down one's throat. Unfortunately, there is some basis for this comment. The frequency with which ideas that have been considered true are revised is too great to permit an unqualified negation of this allegation. This matter has also been of importance in the recent controversy about origins — the controversy between creation and evolution. Concern is for what is true versus what is taught.

The present practice in many educational programs is to teach the general theory of evolution as the only valid concept of origins. While this is being done, dissenting creationists point out that their ideas, which they feel are no less speculative than evolutionary ones, are suppressed. This suppression is considered a breach of academic freedom. The reverse situation has also occurred. In 1925 the state of Tennessee passed a law forbidding the teaching of non-biblical views of the origin of man in public schools. Arguments from the standpoint of academic freedom were presented against the statute at the famous "Monkey Trial." Clarence Darrow, the renowned trial lawyer for the defense, pointed out: "Here we find today as brazen and as bold an attempt to destroy learning as was ever made in the Middle Ages." When the statute was eventually repealed over 40 years later, evolutionists again presented a strong argument from the standpoint of academic freedom. In a press release the National Science Teachers Association expressed the opinion that: "Society cannot tolerate any obstruction of the process of academic inquiry and the dissemination of information and ideas." Now that evolution is almost exclusively taught, evolutionists are saying practically nothing about academic freedom but are appealing to the principle of separation of church and state to keep creation out of public schools. Conversely creationists are now making a strong appeal to academic freedom. It would have been commendable if the evolutionists who had been promoting academic freedom so as to teach evolution would have continued this good trend by promoting academic freedom to teach creation concepts also.

Academic freedom is necessary for the evaluation and incorporation of information into one's truth system. It is a commodity that, at least in principle, is jealously guarded by the academic community. On this basis unacceptable influences and biases are often rejected. The principle does not mean simply freedom to promote one's particular views regardless of how biased they may be — this can actually result in academic restriction. It especially entails openness and the responsibility to recognize as much

valid information as possible. Actually, the principle works better in speeches than in the research laboratory, where the practicalities of inquiry often force one to work under the influence of a proposed or accepted hypothesis or paradigm. Nevertheless it is a principle that must be encouraged if one is going to be open to new information and views. To oppose it encourages a closed intellectual system that cannot claim to be as good as one that is open and free to follow wherever truth may lead.

Regarding the issue of origins, both evolutionists and creationists have accused the other of operating under a closed system which is not academically free. Evolutionists state that creationists start with their conclusions, i.e., the concept of creation as given in the book of Genesis, while creationists accuse evolutionists of allowing only a simple naturalistic system which excludes the less tangible aspects of reality. The recent reaction against the National Science Foundation sponsored MACOS (Man: A Course of Study) program is an example of the problem induced by such a purely naturalistic system. Here, educational materials about man prepared for elementary schools were rejected by parents because of their purely humanistic approach. Speaking on behalf of the parents, Congressman John B. Conlan objected to the “morally sick content” that such a narrow view encourages.

In view of the foregoing I would like to propose that in the study of origins academic freedom should be strongly encouraged so that new data can readily be assimilated into the truth-evaluating process, regardless of where it leads.

This ideal does not mean that because one encourages an open system of investigation, one cannot draw conclusions and therefore one must forever make tentativeness his goal. There is some truth to the dictum that many an open mind has revealed a vacant lot. The goal of intellectual pursuits is truth and not academic freedom, which is only a tool to reach that goal. One should draw the best conclusions possible — and act on that basis. However, one should make his conclusions revisable; otherwise he has moved into a closed system that cannot claim the truth-gathering value of an open process of investigation. The person who feels that his conclusions are unrevisable denies academic freedom and will not be as useful in arriving at truth as someone with a more open mind. Truth does not fear the investigation of new ideas — they might be true.

Ariel A. Roth