

NEWS AND COMMENTS

GEORGIA HOUSE BILL 690

For more than a year, the State of Georgia has been a battleground for the controversial subject of origins. Representative Tommy Smith introduced a bill into the General Assembly mandating the “teaching and presentation of scientific creationism in public schools if the theory of evolution is taught.” Forty representatives signed the proposal as co-sponsors, and after a public hearing in August, House Bill 690 was sent to the House education subcommittee.

The bill did not represent the first attempt in Georgia to win equal time for creation. Some creationist literature had been included among the textbooks approved by the Georgia Department of Education, and creationism as an alternative theory to evolution had already been introduced into the curriculum of two of the largest public school systems in Georgia — DeKalb and Cobb counties. These inroads resulted primarily from the efforts of CAVE (Citizens for Another Voice in Education), a group organized in large part by Charlie and Kathy Sills of Cobb county. Even while H.B. 690 was pending in the House, eleven other counties joined in endorsing a balanced, two-model approach to origins.

Much publicity was given to the bill. Advocates included the State Parent Teacher Association (representing over 200,000 parents), the Georgia Baptist Convention and other fundamentalist Christian groups, and individuals such as Braswell D. Deen, Jr., Chief Judge of the Georgia Court of Appeals. Repeatedly they stated their concern for the loss of absolute values resulting from the dominance of humanistic principles in the schools. The teaching of evolution, with its concepts of evolving origins and evolving ethics, was cited as the cause of permissiveness which in turn led to an increase in crime.

Although it appeared that H.B. 690 would not encounter some of the difficulties experienced by similar legislation in other parts of the United States, the bill was not completely free from dissenters. As the opening of the 1980 legislative session approached, opposition intensified. In November, the American Atheists Association, led by Madalyn Murray O’Hair, opened an Atlanta chapter to combat H.B. 690. Other opponents included the State Department of Education, the State Board of Education, the Georgia Education Association, and the American Association of University Professors.

Along with accusing H.B. 690 supporters of attempting to include religion under the guise of scientific theory, some opponents also argued that decisions regarding classroom curriculum and instruction should be

made by the local school board instead of the state legislature. Proponents of the bill responded by insisting that because their wishes were being ignored on the local level, the state must mandate the academic freedom to teach alternative views and make provisions in the curriculum by which these views can be taught.

In February the House education subcommittee, chaired by Cas Robinson, sent H.B. 690 to the full committee, but not before making a significant change in the wording: the term “scientific creationism” was replaced by “divine creationism.” Debate in the House produced further changes when the word “divine” was dropped and the phrase “by God” was inserted after the words “creation” and “created.” This revised form was approved in the House by a vote of 136 to 30.

The following month, after a 40-minute debate, the Senate passed H.B. 690 by a vote of 46 to 7. Although some critics protested that the measure was unconstitutional, the debate was dominated by those who saw no church-state conflict. State Senator Hugh A. Carter, chairman of the Senate Education Committee, commented that since the Constitution of Georgia included the phrase “relying on the protection and guidance of almighty God,” he could see nothing wrong with saying “creation by God.”

Other senators also argued for the teaching of creation. State Senator Lawrence Stumbaugh said that school children were not being taught both sides of the story, and State Senator Ted J. Land added that when the children are taught a view of origins that differs from the theory they have learned in church and Sunday school, “they become confused. They don’t know what to believe.”

When H.B. 690 was sent back to the House for approval in its revised form, it came within one vote of passage. It was then sent to a conference committee for a compromise draft. The committee gave parents the option of choosing the two-model approach, and families that objected to having their children taught about creation would be allowed to have them excused.

On the last day of the 1980 legislative session, the Senate approved the compromise version, but the House did not have a chance for a final vote before the session adjourned. Undaunted by this setback, supporters of the two-model approach to origins believe they have amassed enough public interest and support to win legislative passage next year.

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