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***Religion in the Classroom?
Darwin's Only Half the Story***

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Religion in the Classroom?

Darwin's Only Half the Story

By Bryce Christensen, Ph.D.

During the recent debate over the teaching of “divine design” in the science classroom, Utahns heard more than a few sermons about the need to keep religion out of the public schools. “We don't teach religion in school,” said Brett Moulding, curriculum director for the state Board of Education, in explaining his opposition to a “divine design” bill considered by the state Legislature. Though Mr. Moulding may have had perfectly good reasons for objecting to the way “divine design” would have brought religion into the science class, he was quite mistaken in his belief that public-school teachers do not – or should not – teach religion. And the fact that an official in his position could hold such an erroneous view raises deep questions about what public-school teachers think they are teaching—and why.

Scientists and administrators may have sound logic for keeping religion out of the science classroom (though it seems an unnecessarily sterile teaching philosophy that would hide from students the fact, for instance, that Newton regarded God as a divine Piper and gravity as His divine music). But how would any credible philosophy of education keep religion out of the literature classroom?

The problem is not simply that many works of literature highlight religious principles—whether it be Milton's sublime celebration of God's wisdom in “Paradise Lost,” Dante's harrowing portrayal of God's justice in “The Inferno,” or Thompson's grimly explicit atheism in his “City of the Dreadful Night.” The problem is that the act of assessing literary works often requires some theological context.

No less an authority than T.S. Eliot (one of the most acute critics and greatest poets of the 20th century) declared that “literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological perspective.” The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy similarly asserted that “the estimation of the value of art” depends ultimately on “what are termed religions.” And the brilliantly innovative poet Gerard Manley Hopkins hailed Jesus Christ as “the only just literary critic.” If Mr. Moulding and those who share his views intend to ban such clearly religious views from the literature class, then teachers can give their students only a woefully contracted understanding of literature.

Quite possibly Mr. Moulding and others like him would grudgingly allow some teaching ABOUT religion in the literature classroom so long as it never becomes teaching OF religion. That distinction—difficult to maintain in any setting—utterly dissolves the moment a teacher reads from, say, George Herbert's 17th-century Christian masterpiece “The Temple” with real joy and conviction. That distinction likewise vanishes whenever a teacher evaluates—or even allows students to evaluate—a religiously sensitive work (such as Swinburne's “Hymn to Proserpine”) from the kind of definite theological perspective Eliot insists is necessary for a complete criticism.

And if those terrified that students might actually learn religion in schools deny students the opportunity to hear the religious voices in which Milton and Dante speak as creators, and in which Eliot, Tolstoy, and Hopkins speak as critics, then they will very likely expose those students to a one-sided bombardment of anti-religious literary voices.

These attacks may come through openly anti-religious literary works such as Thomas Hardy's "Return of the Native" or Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning." A different kind of attack can come through decidedly religious works that celebrate a wild heterodoxy of the sort that Blake gives readers in "Jerusalem" and Carlyle proffers in his "Sartor Resartus." But perhaps most subversive are the attacks that come through modern and post-modern critical theories (such as those advanced by Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva) denying traditional religious beliefs any role in the assessment of religion.

Regardless of what such an approach may do in the science classroom, Utahns have reason to fear that a dogmatic secularism has already made the literature classroom hostile to many parents' religious convictions. Utah's literature classrooms are indeed probably not very different from those teachers James Brewbaker has in view when he concedes in "English Journal" that literature in public schools is likely to leave students with the impression that "religion is not very important." Perhaps it is time Utahns worried less about whether biology teachers offer a doctrinal religious perspective on fossils and more about whether literature teachers share with students the luminous literary art and criticism inspired by faith.