

Shelve Under "Freedom"

Contributed by Barbara Fister
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Scott Jaschik of Inside Higher Ed has an interesting article on cases in which clashes between evolution and a literal interpretation of the Bible have been characterized as challenges to academic freedom. Two situations involve legal actions on behalf of biologists who have a beef with evolution; one lost a bid for tenure, another lost a postdoc position at a national lab. The third case, previously covered in Newsweek, is dealt with at greater length.

Richard Collings, who has taught at his alma mater, Olivet Nazarene University, for nearly three decades, wrote a book that argued science and faith were not incompatible. He has been told he can no longer teach the introductory biology course and his book, which had been used in courses in several departments, can no longer be taught. Apparently, the school had come under significant pressure from outside to repudiate Colling's audacious belief that scientists who accept evolution can also be devoutly evangelical Christians. The AAUP has taken up his cause.

This led me to think about how libraries, though they may seem traditionally quiet and orderly places, provide a space for clashing ideas to duke it out. Librarians often add books to their shelves that they believe contain information that wrong or even pernicious. Personally, I believe the research behind *The Bell Curve* to be flawed, with much of it coming from a Trojan horse "scholarly" journal founded by a white supremacist, but it needs to be available if people are going to respond to its widely-read arguments. When receiving a gift of a collection of books from a political science faculty member some years ago, I debated adding one of them. It was an old copy of an influential book, one that affected a great many lives and just happened to be a totally hateful fraud. It wasn't a scholarly edition that explained its lies and their impact - at the time I couldn't find such an edition to add to the collection instead. But because it's historically significant, and because our students need to be able to examine documents that influenced twentieth century barbarism, I decided to add the copy of *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion* - without any warning labels attached. Learning how to read such documents critically is an essential outcome of a liberal education. It's why we promote information literacy; there are a lot of lies out there, and a lot of people who are swayed by them.

More recently, when putting together a book display for Darwin Day, I got a complaint from a faculty member - in the religion department! - that it shouldn't include a book that trashed Darwin in order to advocate for Intelligent Design. I decided to keep it in. It's not about giving badly argued or false ideas equal time. It's just that you can't critique an argument if you can't examine its source.

There is a risk, of course. A student might think because a book is in the library, it must be true. Others may think we shouldn't waste scarce resources on books that aren't based on sound scholarship. But that's the subversive mission of libraries - they put books together in nice, orderly rows that don't provide answers; they provide many answers that need to be negotiated. And yes, not all of them are right; many of them are dead wrong, but have influenced the way people approach their subject. Figuring it out is up to you.

One footnote to the article in Inside Higher Ed: the library at Olivet Nazarene has four copies of Colling's book. One is the archives, one is currently on the shelf, and two are currently checked out.