‘Creation-science’ and the law

Louisiana’s new law that requires public schools to give equal treatment to so-called “creation-science” whenever the theory of evolution is taught raises disturbing questions concerning the separation of church and state.

It is true that neither this law nor the similar statute enacted last year by Arkansas explicitly mandates religious teaching as such. Nevertheless, the “creation-science” which the statutes do mandate is a version of the literal interpretation of Genesis which Christian fundamentalists espouse.

This is especially clear in the Arkansas law, which, unlike the Louisiana statute, includes a definition of “creation-science.” This “science,” it says, includes the sudden creation from nothing of the universe, energy, and organic life substantially in their present forms. It explains Earth’s history in terms of catastrophes, especially a global (Noah’s) flood. It maintains that Earth and the universe were formed at a specific time and recently, within the past 10,000 years or so.

Many Americans are concerned that such views, if introduced in the schools by law, will not only do great damage to the quality of science teaching, jeopardizing the training of the nation’s future scientists, but lead to the overt introduction of sectarian instruction in them. That is why a number of religious organizations and religious leaders, as well as scientific organizations and individuals, have joined with the American Civil Liberties Union in a court test of the Arkansas law. The ACLU says it will challenge the Louisiana law, too.

Certainly creationists have a right to interpret the Bible as they wish. However, for a state to force that view on public school teaching amounts to establishment of one brand of religion by governmental authority, which is forbidden by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

The public schools now teach human evolutionary theory as it has developed within the broad scientific community. This does not mean, however, that persons teaching such theory would or should claim that it represents the final truth about man and the universe. Given the many revolutionary changes in scientific thought in the 20th century, scientists themselves would be the first to admit they are far from understanding the laws underlying reality or even what reality is. Reasonable explanations of physical phenomena today become myths tomorrow. Good teachers of science will strive to cultivate open and inquiring minds in their students, reminding them that there do exist other approaches, including religious ones. But tax-supported schools should not start down the course of teaching the views of a particular religion.

There obviously is a deep longing among many segments of the American public for a greater affirmation and application of religious faith in everyday life, especially in a society grown so secularized. Perhaps what is needed is a recognition that the quest of scientific thinking is not necessarily in conflict with religious values and the concept of ultimate spiritual reality.