



Sarah Palin's Big Bad Creationism

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When John McCain announced his intention to make a freshman -- and female -- Alaska Governor the next vice president on the eve of the Republican convention, the liberal media conspiracy went predictably haywire. The litany of revelations about Sarah Palin only grows as time goes on. And though it has been overshadowed by teenage pregnancies and doctored photographs, one question has got the lattes shaking in a great many progressive hands: is Sarah Palin a creationist?

The *Los Angeles Times* called her that outright. *Newsweek*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *New York Times* were more cautious, reporting that Palin supports teaching creationism alongside evolution in public schools. But even this isn't quite right. While, in a 2006 gubernatorial debate, she may have declared herself "a proponent of teaching both," she backed down somewhat in a subsequent interview: "I don't think there should be a prohibition against debate if it comes up in class. It doesn't have to be part of the curriculum." All she's asking, it seems, is that students not be suspended for asking a question about God.

Palin went on to say that her father was a science teacher and taught her about "his theories of evolution." When pushed for her own conclusions, she admitted only, "I believe we have a creator." Sorting through her equivocations, creationist organizations like Answers in Genesis and the Discovery Institute are still reluctant to declare her one of their own.

In contrast, both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have made their positions on evolution clear, even while reaching out to religious voters. Clinton is "shocked" by creationism advocates. "One of our gifts from God," she adds, "is the ability to reason." For Obama, "it's a mistake to try to cloud the teaching of science with theories that frankly don't hold up to scientific inquiry."

Palin's maneuvers, in fact, are nothing new for the McCain campaign. As his presidential bid got rolling in '05 and '06, John McCain expressed openness to "intelligent design" theory, a recent phenomenon that dresses creationism in a lab coat. While admitting, "I happen to believe in evolution," he insisted (incorrectly) that many scientists believe intelligent design deserves a fair hearing. While at first suggesting that all positions should be presented, in the same breath he concludes that the most extreme creationism should "probably

not" be taught in science class. In 2007, McCain appeared at an event sponsored by the Discovery Institute, the leading cadre promoting intelligent design. Like Palin, he offers only mixed messages.

At the Republican convention, Katie Couric asked Cindy McCain about creationism. She replied, "I think both sides should be taught in schools. I think the more children have a frame of reference and an opportunity to read and know and make better decisions and judgments when they are adults."

What makes Palin seem different are all the videos circulating on YouTube of her thoroughly typical Pentecostal church in Wasilla, Alaska. Raised as she was amidst all that praising, praying, and hellfire-fearing, some worry, she might actually believe this stuff. James Dobson, one of the country's most influential evangelicals, had refused to support John McCain until Palin hit the scene. "If I went into the polling booth today, I would pull the lever for John McCain," he declared days later. Like many social conservatives who were unsure about the GOP ticket, he caught the Palin bug.

On the evolution question, too, Palin's ambiguity reads as sincerity. That kind of doublespeak has been requisite for talking about creationism at least since 1986, when the Supreme Court refused to allow "creation science" in public science classrooms. Soon after, much of the creationist movement recast itself as intelligent design. ID, as it is dubbed, exalts unknowing to a science. Rather than finding explanations for what we see in nature, it fixates on what remains unexplained and speculates on how a higher power might be the cause. Though nearly all its advocates are Christians, many say that in principle their ideas could point to super-intelligent extraterrestrials as much as God the Father.

Agreeing to Disagree

Beyond evolution controversies, ambiguity has been a defining feature of American Christianity recently. Instead of the endless arguments that once gave birth to the country's thousands of splintered denominations, the late twentieth century saw a rallying around the fundamentals of biblical faith that most -- conservatives, at least -- could agree on. Arcane yet once-important questions about the nature of Christ and the status of prophecy gave way to absolute certainties like the need for school prayer and the wretchedness of abortion. When the Republican Party embraced this new voting block, states' rights and libertarian economics became part of the consensus too.

Though she has spent much of her life attending Wasilla Assembly of God, a church squarely in the Pentecostal tradition, Sarah Palin prefers to identify as simply "Christian" and now attends a "non-denominational" church. This increasingly popular anti-denomination usually means casual attire and a modern rock hymnal. Worshipers utter spontaneous prayers, not memorized formulas. The preaching is more self-help than fire and brimstone. And it revels in the new conservative consensus. Such vague, inclusive labels cover over

something that is actually quite specific.

It is no accident, then, that Christian creationists turned to vagueness after their defeat in the courts. On the one hand, the strategy made practical sense. Teaching creationism as science was illegal, so they had to try teaching something else. But it was also common sense to the libertarian tendencies of the new consensus. A popular catch-phrase of the movement became "teach the controversy," which is exactly what Cindy McCain, for instance, has embraced: tell the students about all the options in a balanced way and leave it to them to decide. Or leave it to local school boards to decide.

Once again, however, leaving the matter ambiguous is not quite what it claims to be. Just as non-denominational Christianity has become a denomination of its own, teaching the controversy is an inherent misrepresentation. It sneaks past the courts and the scientific community, which both consider creationism inappropriate in science classrooms. Its knee-jerk appeal aside, the proposition is rather odd. In no other case are major questions of scientific (or religious) doctrine left up to be decided by teenagers who are being exposed to it for the first time.

Evolution's Worst Nightmare?

The proverbial worry that has some up in arms about Sarah Palin (and social conservatives so enthusiastic) is that she might be "one heartbeat away" from the presidency. Sharing the ticket with a 72-year-old geezer doesn't help. The scenario goes like this: he keels over the day after inauguration and suddenly we've found ourselves in a Pentecostal dictatorship that gives research grants to six-day creationists and opens every session of Congress with speaking in tongues.

There are even marks in her record to fuel this anxiety. While mayor of Wasilla back in 1996, Palin looked into the possibility of banning books that she found objectionable from the public library. Mary Ellen Emmons, the city librarian, refused to cooperate, and soon received notice that Palin was having her fired. Thanks to a showing of public support, however, Palin relented and Emmons kept her job.

This may be more an exception than the rule. As if to assuage evolutionists' worst fears, the Associated Press posted an article titled, "Palin has not pushed creation science as governor." "Neither," it adds, "have Palin's socially conservative personal views on issues like abortion and gay marriage been translated into policies during her 20 months as Alaska's chief executive." Instead, bread and butter issues seem closer to her heart, especially strengthening the energy industry that is the backbone of Alaska's welfare state. During her speech at the Republican convention, Palin had the audience in fits chanting, "Drill, baby, drill!" And at her home church in Wasilla, she encouraged people to pray for God's will to bring them a new \$30 billion gas

pipeline.

For the past eight years the United States has had a president who said, when asked about evolution, that "both sides ought to be properly taught." Yet it was a Bush-appointed judge who, in late 2005, ruled intelligent design unconstitutional in science class. Talking about "teaching the controversy" makes good with the regime of ambiguity, but so far it hasn't amounted to much. Next to foreign wars and Terri Schiavo, evolution has not made the cut as a presidential priority.

Neither, however, has taking the advice of sound science on other questions. A report from the Union of Concerned Scientists found, in 2004, that the Bush administration had been "suppressing, distorting or manipulating the work done by scientists at federal agencies." When asked by *Inside Higher Ed* about this habit, a professor of environmental policy at the University of Alaska said of Palin, "She will continue it."

Ambiguity can be good theology, rubbing over needless differences for the sake of greater goals. And it certainly has benefits politically. But it makes for lousy science policy.

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