

On eve of Darwin's birthday, states take steps to limit evolution

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(RNS) On the eve of the 203rd anniversary of Charles Darwin's birthday, lawmakers in at least four states are taking steps to hinder the teaching of evolution in public schools, while other bills would do the same without naming evolution outright.

One of the bills, New Hampshire's House Bill 1148, not only singles out evolution, but would require teachers to discuss its proponents' "political and ideological viewpoints and their position on the concept of atheism." It is scheduled for a hearing in early February.

The author of the bill, Republican state Rep. Jerry Bergevin, has linked the teaching of evolution to the 1999 Columbine High School massacre and Hitler's atrocities and associates it with atheism.

"I want the full portrait of evolution and the people who came up with the ideas to be presented," Bergevin told the Concord Monitor. "It's a worldview and it's godless. Atheism has been tried in various societies, and they've been pretty criminal domestically and internationally. The Soviet Union, Cuba, the Nazis, China today: They don't respect human rights."

In many ways, the debate over evolution mirrors strategies adopted by opponents in the battle over abortion: If it can't be outlawed outright, critics will at least try to make it more difficult.

Several atheist organizations have called for the withdrawal of all the bills, but are keeping an especially close eye on Bergevin's. David Silverman, president of American Atheists, has called it "ignorant, infuriating bigotry."

Ahead of Darwin's birthday on Feb. 12, other current anti-evolution bills include:

-- In the Indiana Senate, a bill would allow school districts to "require the teaching of various theories concerning the origin of life within the school corporation." That bill has already passed a statehouse committee and was scheduled for a vote on Jan 31.

-- The "Missouri Standard Science Act" would require the equal treatment of evolution and "intelligent design," an idea that the universe was created by an unnamed "designer." A second bill would require teachers to encourage students "to explore scientific questions, learn about scientific evidence, develop critical thinking skills, and respond appropriately and respectfully to differences of opinion about controversial issues, including biological and chemical evolution."

-- A bill in the Oklahoma Senate would require the state's board of education to help teachers promote "critical thinking, logical analysis, open and objective discussion of scientific theories including, but not limited to, evolution, the origin of life, global warming, and human cloning" if a local school district makes that request.

-- A second bill in the New Hampshire House would require science teachers to instruct students that "proper scientific inquiry results from not committing to any one theory or hypothesis, no matter how firmly it appears to be established."

-- A bill in Virginia would make it illegal for state colleges to require a class that conflicts with a student's religious views. Critics say that would enable a student to receive a biology degree, for example, without studying evolution if he or she objected to it.

-- A second bill in Indiana would require the state board of education to draft rules about the teaching of ideas in science class that cannot be proven by evidence -- a clear doorway for the teaching of creationism and intelligent design, critics say.

While all the bills have drawn the attention of several large atheist groups including the Center for Inquiry and the National Atheist Party, Bergevin's bill in New Hampshire has raised the most eyebrows.

"Evolution is not just for atheists, and has been accepted as fact by many religious institutions, including the Catholic Church," Silverman said. "It is clearly an attempt to create religious discussion in science class, and to somehow make science 'not for believers.'"

Even if the bill were to become law, some expect it to be short-lived.

"In the unlikely event it would pass, it would quickly be struck down by the courts as unconstitutional," said Rob Boston, a senior policy analyst at the Washington-based Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

"It is just warmed-over creationism, which the Supreme Court has already said is unconstitutional, and the government cannot require anyone to stand up and explain where they stand on a religion or a philosophy."

If the bills stand little chance of surviving, why do they get proposed?

Josh Rosenau, a programs and policy director at the National Center for Science Education, chalks it up to the high number of rookie legislators.

In 2010, he said, "A lot of very conservative legislators got elected who did not

necessarily know we have debated these bills before and they did not pass," he said. "You had people elected as ideologues and they are fulfilling their campaign promises."

Indeed, Bergevin is a first-time legislator who had wide support from the Tea Party. Still, Rosenau said, Bergevin's bill is unusual for requiring teachers to discuss a scientist's religious views.

"Just on its face, I think a court would look askance at it," he said. "You can't say, 'On behalf of the state of New Hampshire I endorse theism over atheism.'"

The bigger picture, Boston said, is the strategy of the bills that do not name evolution per se, like the two in Virginia and Indiana.

"They are smart enough to know that a direct attack on evolution is not likely to survive, so they instead put some kind of penalty on teaching it to make (educators) afraid," he said.