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Series E: General Alphabetical Files. 1960-1992

Box 90, Folder 7, Scientific creationism, 1981.



January 26, 1981

William Galnick

Samuel Rabinove

"Scientific Creationism"

In your memo of January 13 on this subject, you invited my thinking on the kinds of points our members might make in writing to their state legislators to oppose the bill that has now been reintroduced (please send me a copy of it), as well as in testimony that might be delivered before an appropriate legislative committee. Enclosed is a copy of a recent background memorandum on "scientific creationism", which you may find helpful in this regard. (An edited version will appear in the March issue of Reform Judaism.) For your lawyers who may be interested, the citation to the case of Daniel v. Waters, in which a Tennessee "creationism" law was held to violate the First Amendment, is 515 F.2d 485 (6th Cir. 1975).

I would urge that the battle against "scientific creationism" in Georgia not be made into another case of Jews v. Christians. Instead of Jews being in the vanguard of the assault, it is most important to enlist liberal Christian clergy and non-Jewish teachers of science as the "shock troops." In this connection, black columnist Lee My contributed a powerful attack on "scientific creationism" in his column in the Atlanta Constitution of February 13, 1980. Maybe he can be persuaded to do another.

SR:lk

CC: Harold Applebaum
Marc Tanenbaum ✓

BACKGROUND MEMORANDUM ON "SCIENTIFIC CREATIONISM"

By Sam Rabinove

A powerful drive is under way throughout the country to foster the teaching of "scientific creationism" and to discredit the theory of evolution. "Scientific creationism" is an attempt to cloak fundamentalist religion in the language of science. Public school systems are being pressured to revise biology curricula to enable the teaching of the Biblical account of creation as an explanation for the origin of life and of the universe. To advance this objective, bills have been introduced in at least 15 states, during the past several years, that would require public schools to offer material that supports the story of creation as depicted in Genesis. Thus far, the only such bill to have been passed and signed into law was enacted in 1973 in Tennessee. The law was declared unconstitutional in 1975 by a federal court in the case of Daniel v. Waters on the ground that it amounted to religious teaching and therefore violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. A few states, however, including Texas and Iowa, have adopted policies requiring that evolution can be taught only as a theory and that children must be taught that other theories may be just as valid.

In 1925, John T. Scopes was tried for teaching Darwinian theory to high school students, in violation of an old Tennessee law, was found guilty and was fined one hundred dollars. That theory, which in religious circles at that time was widely regarded as blasphemous, was virtually absent from American public schools for many years. Only in the past twenty years has evolution been prominently expounded in public school textbooks. In 1968, in the case of Epperson v. Arkansas, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously that a statute which made it unlawful to teach the theory of evolution in public schools violated the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment. The Court said: "...there can be no doubt that Arkansas has sought to prevent its teachers from discussing the theory of evolution because it is contrary to the belief of some that the book of Genesis must be the exclusive source of doctrine as to the origin of man."

The "scientific creationism" movement today is being led by three groups: the Creation Research Society of Ann Arbor, Michigan, the Creation Science Research Center and the Institution for Creation Research, both of San Diego. These groups publish and market numerous books, pamphlets and audio-visual materials. All members of the creation research societies subscribe to the following statement of belief:

"The Bible is the written word of God, and because it is inspired throughout, all its assertions are historically and scientifically true...this means that the account of origins in Genesis is a factual presentation of simple historical truths."

The two pivotal points of conflict between the creationists and the evolutionists concern the beginnings of mankind and the age of the earth. To the creationists,

any theory that man evolved from lower forms of life is anathema because of the Biblical account of God's special creation of Adam and Eve. They believe that all basic types of plants and animals were made by direct acts of God during the week of creation, as revealed in Genesis. And while evolutionists cite scientific evidence that the earth is several billion years old, creationists place the earth's age at about 10,000 years.

Although the creationists believe that the world and the human race were created out of nothing (ex nihilo) by act of God, they no longer insist on prohibiting any mention of evolution in public school classrooms. Instead, they are battling to compel school boards to give "scientific creationism" what amounts to "equal time" with evolution theory in all science classes. They cite relatively minor disagreements among biologists about evolution theory as a basis for repudiating the theory itself, even though scientists overwhelmingly believe that it is the very cornerstone of the biological sciences. In response to creationist arguments, Dr. Niles Eldredge, curator of invertebrates at the American Museum of Natural History, has said:

"Evolutionary biology is not complete. It is not finished. Some huge holes have developed and that's great. It shows that the science is alive and well. Evolution is still the only scientific explanation for why we have so many kinds of organisms and why they all look so different. Creationism is not science. It doesn't make a single statement that could be tested or experienced in any sort of way."

The attack on evolution is part of a much broader attack by what may be loosely defined as the religious "New Right" on what they call "the religion of secular humanism." They view the teaching of evolution, at bottom, as tending to undermine the Bible and therefore as an attack on traditional religious belief and value systems. As fundamentalist Christians, they are opposed to any education which may be at variance with Biblical doctrine. Unlike most members of liberal Christian denominations, they construe the Bible literally in every respect. Hence their convictions are apt to clash with the available evidence across the entire spectrum of scientific inquiry -- in biology, geology, anthropology, physics and astronomy.

In the recent election campaign, Ronald Reagan addressed a meeting of Evangelical Christians in Dallas, declaring that there were flaws in the theory of evolution and that if evolution is taught in public schools the Biblical story of creation should be taught alongside it. In fact, the creationist movement took a significant step forward in California during the administration of Governor Reagan when the state board of education (seven of whose ten members had been appointed by Reagan) in 1969 voted to accept a policy statement that creationism is a valid alternative to the theory of evolution. The board then decided, in the face of much opposition, to seek revision of biology textbooks used in the state's public schools to reflect the view that evolution is only a theory and is no more verifiable than creationist doctrine. Since California represents such a huge market textbook publishers began to trim their language to accommodate the creationist

point of view. In one book, for example, the words "slowly over millions of years, the dinosaurs died out," became "slowly the dinosaurs died out." Since the California experience, publishers, scientists and teachers have been resisting the "equal time" for creation thrust all over the country. Other states which nevertheless have accommodated to creationist demands in various way include Texas, South Dakota, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Mississippi, Georgia and Indiana.

Like any scientific theory, of course, evolution can and should be subjected to critical scrutiny. Evidence either for it or against it can be adduced, examined and either accepted or rejected. "Scientific creationism", on the other hand, as it is perceived by its active proponents, is not really a theory at all. Rather it is an article of faith. While those who now accept evolution are free to change their minds, if new scientific evidence were to be presented, the creationists enjoy no such freedom. For them to change their minds would be to reject the word of God, which would be unthinkable. The argument that "equal time" must be given to "scientific creationism" is almost on a par with maintaining that whenever the heliocentric theory of the solar system is taught, equal time must be given also to the geocentric theory. Extending the analogy further, one might argue that equal time also should be given in science classes to astrologers and to the Flat Earth Society.

There can be no serious question that teaching in public schools of "scientific creationism" is religious teaching and hence violates the constitutional doctrine of separation of church and state. In 1971, in the case of Lemon v. Kurtzman, the U.S. Supreme Court delineated three tests for a statute to pass constitutional muster under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment: It must have a secular purpose, its primary effect must neither advance nor inhibit religion, and it must not foster excessive government entanglement with religion. The teaching of "scientific creationism" in public schools would fail all three tests.

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date February 10, 1981

to Marc Tanenbaum

from Seymour Samet

subject

At the joint meeting which the DAD had with you and your staff we had an opportunity to discuss the proposed AJC statement on "scientific creationism." At the conclusion of our deliberations it was suggested that changes in the proposed wording be sent to Sam Rabinove. We are about to take next steps on this and you will note, from Sam's attached correspondence to me, no changes has been suggested except for one which he has initiated.

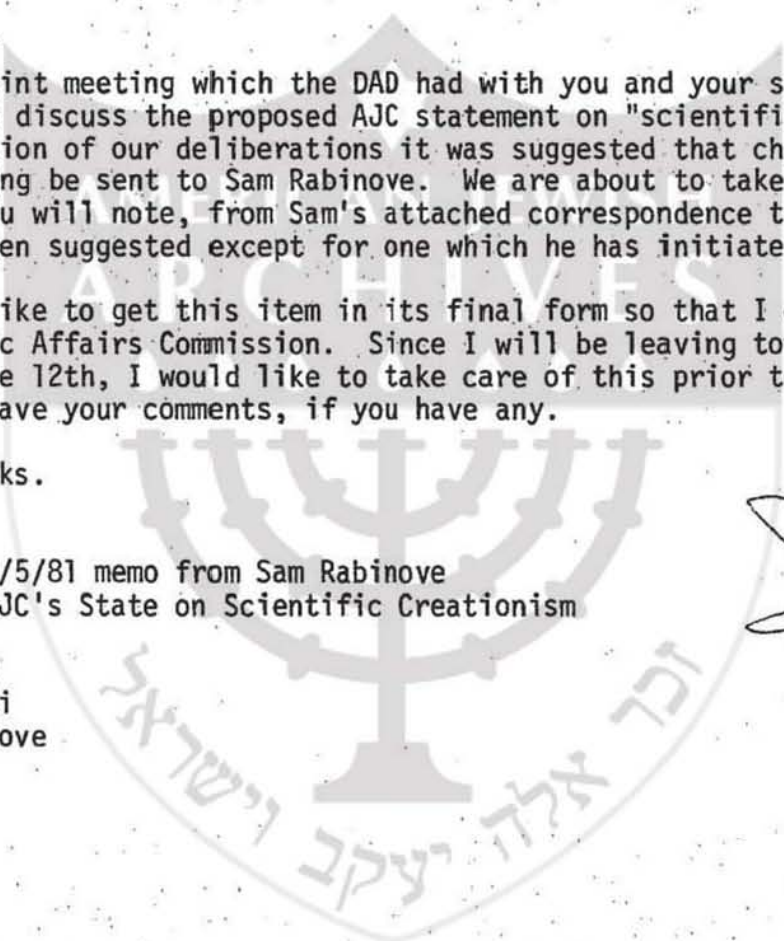
I would like to get this item in its final form so that I can send it out to the Domestic Affairs Commission. Since I will be leaving town for 10 days starting on the 12th, I would like to take care of this prior to my departure. May I please have your comments, if you have any.

Many thanks.

SS:og

Attachment: 2/5/81 memo from Sam Rabinove
AJC's State on Scientific Creationism

cc: Jim Rudin
Judy Banki
Sam Rabinove



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

FEB 11 1981

date February 5, 1981

to Seymour Samet

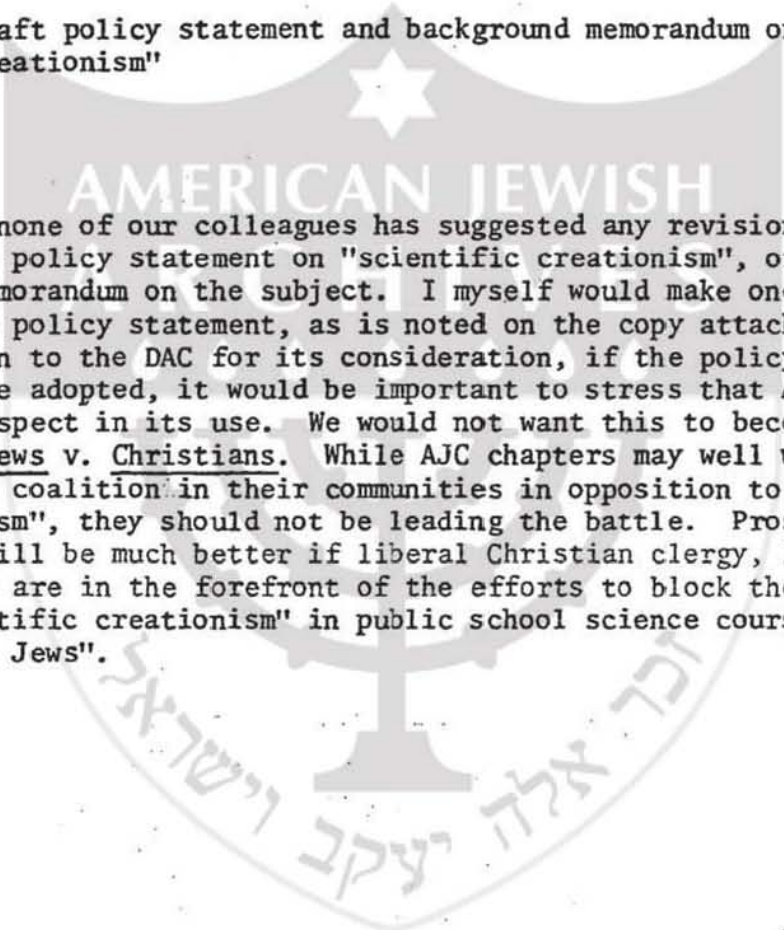
from Sam Rabinove

subject Draft policy statement and background memorandum on "scientific creationism"

To date, none of our colleagues has suggested any revisions, either of the draft policy statement on "scientific creationism", or the background memorandum on the subject. I myself would make one change in the draft policy statement, as is noted on the copy attached. For submission to the DAC for its consideration, if the policy statement were to be adopted, it would be important to stress that AJC should be circumspect in its use. We would not want this to become another case of Jews v. Christians. While AJC chapters may well wish to be part of a coalition in their communities in opposition to "scientific creationism", they should not be leading the battle. Prospects of success will be much better if liberal Christian clergy, laity and educators are in the forefront of the efforts to block the intrusion of "scientific creationism" in public school science courses, rather than "the Jews".

SR:lk

Sam



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

STATEMENT ON SCIENTIFIC CREATIONISM

The American Jewish Committee has always maintained that the furtherance of religious beliefs is a responsibility of the church, the synagogue and the home, not of the public school. This policy is in full accord with the constitutional doctrine of separation of religion and government, as set forth in the First Amendment. It is for this reason that we oppose efforts to promote the teaching of "scientific creationism" in public schools.

The "scientific creationism" movement seeks to teach in public school science classes the ^{Biblical account} ~~story~~ of creation, as depicted in Genesis, alongside the theory of evolution. Since this viewpoint is essentially religious in nature, rather than scientific, it should have no place in public school education. As a scientific theory, evolution can be examined critically on the basis of the evidence either for or against it, and then either accepted or rejected. "Scientific creationism", however, cannot be put to that test. It does not belong in any science curricula in public schools.

Samuel Rabinove
December 31, 1980

Mary Goodman

memorandum

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date January 27, 1981

to DAD Staff

from Seymour Samet

subject

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+   Date: January 28, 1981   +
+   Time: 10:00 - 12 Noon   +
+   Place: Proskauer Room   +
+                               +
+                               +
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R E M I N D E R

Our next DAD staff meeting will be held jointly with members of the Interreligious Affairs Department staff. Our agenda will be limited to a report on our current activities plus a consideration of strategies for dealing with forces within the New Right.

If time permits we will conclude the meeting with a discussion of the attached proposal by Sam Rabinove for an AJC Statement on Scientific Creationism.

Minutes will be taken by Marilyn Braveman.

SS:og

81/600/10
Attachment

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
STATEMENT ON SCIENTIFIC CREATIONISM

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Samuel Rabinove
December 31, 1980