

Culture-war opponents can find common ground

Last week, I was invited to speak at a conference on school reform. I talked about the sorry state of mathematics education in America and how we can make it better. You'd think math would be a bipartisan issue, but nothing is bipartisan in public education. That's why everybody in the room was conservative and Christian.

I don't often get asked to speak to that audience, so when I do, I try to see it as a learning opportunity. That day, I learned a great deal.

I learned that some Christians with training in science and math believe the Earth to be 6,000 years old. One such individual, a civil engineer, complimented me on my talk and wanted to know if bad math in public schools causes people to believe in evolution.

I tried to explain as politely as I could that the same ideas of objective truth behind $2+2=4$ are the same ones that lead us to conclude that evolution is factually correct and that the earth is about 4 billion years old. We wound up having a long conversation afterwards, until I had to catch my plane. I think we parted friends, but I kept thinking of the line from Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." The range of human belief is truly astonishing.

I also learned that some Christians were learning things that were not true. One speaker on the intelligent-design-versus-evolution "controversy" said there were no transitional fossils, that Chinese paleontologists have falsified evolutionary theory and that nature contains "irreducibly complex systems that can't be explained by evolution." These statements are all incorrect.

But I also learned a lot about social conservatives, and came away with a better understanding of what they are worried about. Much of their worries, I think, are well-founded.

I heard a speaker from the Heritage Foundation, Rebecca Hagelin, who wrote the book "Home Invasion." In addition to being a vice president at Heritage, the nation's leading conservative think tank, she's a devout Christian and mother of three teenagers who is mad as heck about how hard it is for her to raise children in a world so at odds with the values she is committed to. But what struck me most was that not once



OPINION

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during her entire talk did she propose any kind of legislation to advance a "pro-family" agenda. Nor indeed did any other speaker.

I had a nice talk with Hagelin afterwards. I'm a founder of an anti-censorship organization, but I'm also a parent of teenagers, and I was amazed at how much we agreed on. Sit down to dinner with your family every night. Keep the TV off. Be aware that corporate America markets aggressively to your kids. Watch their computer use. Get involved in their lives.

Treat boys and girls differently, because they really are different. Simple common sense, really. That these ideas even need articulating is a modern tragedy.

Still, it's probably true that social conservatives will never be as comfortable with American popular culture as the mainstream American population that consumes it. Which is too bad. The ultimate irony of the culture wars is that much of the popular culture conservatives find so horrible actually supports their message.

Take "South Park," for example. Our family watches "South Park" not only because it's hilarious but because it has a lot of messages that are good for my kids. There's a particularly funny episode that has a sex-ed class in kindergarten. The moral? Let kids be kids! Sex education has been entering schools at younger and younger grades, to the point where it's now destructive and harmful. That message is very clear. It's also very conservative.

There's another episode where the characters curse constantly. The hero at the end points out that cursing too much is inappropriate and bad. Also a very conservative message, and one that as a free speech advocate I nonetheless completely support.

I came away from the conference encouraged that at least some, and perhaps many, social conservatives agree that government is not the solution to every problem. If I could say one thing to social conservatives, it would be that America's problem is not too much freedom. It is too little responsibility. On that day, anyway, I felt like the message was getting through.

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