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Addressing the Public About Science and Religion

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Attacks on the integrity of science teaching in our public schools have recently become increasingly threatening. Geology and Darwinian evolution are the primary targets and cosmology is at risk. Up to now, the Supreme Court has excluded teachings based on religion from public schools for constitutional, not scientific, reasons. But now the incumbent Supreme Court seem less committed to strict separation of church and state than were their predecessors, and federal courts are beginning to judge the science itself. In this situation, we need to create a climate of public opinion favorable to the protection of good science by explaining the issues both to students and to others. I have been trying to do that by addressing audiences such as church groups, other community groups, and high school and college classes. I do not seek to convert committed anti-evolutionists. I am trying to inform the reasonable majority who do not really know what science is and does, or what a theory is and how we know when it's right, or why we tell them that all knowledge is provisional but still insist that we are teaching the right science. Many have been advised by their religious teachers that there is no conflict between science and their religious beliefs but do not see how that can be. I try to explain how they are disjoint discussions. I also discuss the likely consequences for our country if we degrade the teaching of science in the public schools. My audiences have generally been receptive. Here I will relate some lessons I have learned from my experience with such talks. Without doubt, the most important lesson is that most Americans have religious beliefs that are important to them and are willing to consider what I say only because they know I respect their beliefs. This work was partially supported by the U.S. Dept. of Energy, Office of Nuclear Physics, under contract DE-AC02-06CH11357.