Guest op-ed: Creationist culture wars, Hollywood style
Monday (05/26) at 11:57 AM

This is a guest editorial by Robert T. Pennock, an evolutionary scientist and philosopher of science at Michigan State University. He is the author of "Tower of Babel: The Evidence against the New Creationism," and was an expert witness in the 2005 Kitzmiller v. Dover trial that ruled that teaching ID creationism in public schools is unconstitutional.

Forget about Hollywood liberals. It is the religious right that is blazing the new trails in making Hollywood serve politics, as seen in the current movie-legislation one-two punch from creationist activists in Michigan and elsewhere.

The movie is "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed." With Ben Stein ("Bueller?!") as the bad boy narrator, "Expelled" purports to reveal a sinister pattern of atheistic prejudice, whereby the “Darwinian Machine” in the academy spits out anyone who dares to suggest that God, not evolution, created biological complexity. In addition to interviewing key figures of the Intelligent Design (ID) creationist movement, all affiliated with Seattle’s Discovery Institute (DI), Stein presents several academic martyrs who purportedly lost jobs for even mentioning ID. As Stein spins it, the Goliath of “Big Science” is stomping on the freedom of speech of these courageous Davids.

The legislation comes in the form of so-called “Academic Freedom” bills, which aim to protect public school teachers who want to introduce “scientific” views like ID into their classrooms to challenge evolution. A half-dozen of these bills have been introduced around the country to coincide with "Expelled," including one in Michigan (HB 6027) by Rep. John Moolenaar, R-Midland, who has sponsored several pro-ID bills in the past. These bills are meant to give David his slingshot.

I enjoy an underdog fantasy tale as much as the next movie-goer, but not when my kids' education is on the line. This isn’t "Star Wars"; these are the culture wars. Unable to earn a place in science honestly, creationists are using a deceptive propaganda film and insider political connections to get into science classes by stealth.

In "Expelled," the deception began early. Scientists like Richard Dawkins were snookered into appearing in the film, having been solicited to be interviewed for

http://michiganmessenger.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=1306
what was purported to be a documentary called "Crossroads: The Intersection of Science and Religion" that was to examine the interplay of science and religion in America. Stein has denied that anyone was deceived, and implied that no one even asked about what the film was about. Not so.

How do I know? Because I received the same solicitation and was interviewed by "Expelled" producer Mark Mathis, though he never mentioned that name or Stein’s involvement. I questioned Mathis in detail about his production company, the nature of the Crossroads documentary and plans for its distribution before agreeing to be interviewed for it. I now know that his answers were misleading and dishonest.

What did Mathis want to interview me about? Why, he asked, can’t ID be discussed in the academy? In retrospect, I see how this question fit with "Expelled’s" message, but at the time I simply thought that he was new to the topic and misinformed. I explained that in fact ID has been given very careful consideration in the academy for more than 15 years. It has been the subject of numerous symposia, academic talks and university courses. ID advocates have been invited to speak at universities, professional conferences and in college classrooms. Their views have been published and discussed in dozens of academic books and hundreds of articles.

The conclusion of all this discussion? That ID is not science but just creationism in a new disguise. It is no surprise that "Expelled" says nothing about the “science” of ID besides the claim that God is responsible for life, for ID has no positive evidence to present. Like previous forms of creationism, ID is nothing more than an attempt to poke holes in evolution. Their arguments have been dissected and dismissed. The truth is, ID wasn’t expelled; it flunked out.

I also explained to Mathis how ID advocates misrepresent evolutionary science as equivalent to atheism. Science is no more atheistic than plumbing. Science can’t test God and so can’t include God in its explanations, but that doesn’t mean that science and belief in God are incompatible. Indeed, the dominant theological view accepts that God could have created using evolution. But ID explicitly rejects theistic evolution. The untold story is that mainstream religious critics of ID are as dismissive of them for theological reasons as scientists are for scientific reasons. Mathis ignored this information.

Apparently the truth didn’t fit with the good vs. evil tale of closed-minded atheist science that they were fabricating. After my phone interview, Mathis never called back to set up the film interview. The movie presents only scientists like Dawkins who are avowed atheists and never mentions the scientific problems with ID or its many religious critics. Such dishonesty run all through the film. What about the "Expelled" martyrs who supposedly lost their jobs for questioning evolution and mentioning ID? Expelledexposed.com documents those and other falsehoods as well.
The “Academic Freedom” bills are similarly dishonest. They are a ruse to get ID creationism in without using the name. Rep. Moolenaar and other ID advocates in the Legislature have introduced a series of bills over the last eight years aimed to get ID in public schools. Early bills introduced ID explicitly, but recent ones follow the new DI strategy of just calling for “critical evaluation” of evolution. DI Fellow Ralph Seelke was brought to Lansing to speak on behalf of the last such bill. It has nothing to do with ID, he testified, but in the very next breath spoke of how it would allow students to learn important arguments against evolution such as those of Michael Behe. Come again? Not about ID? Behe is another DI Fellow, and one of the most prominent ID creationists. The bills may speak of free speech, but their goal is to bring in ID and to undermine evolutionary science.

But is it really wise to paint science as a Goliath to be slain? Toppling science will be great for Michigan’s economy, won’t it? In 2002, Forbes magazine printed an acerbic article titled “How to Ruin American Enterprise” that looks like a primer for the anti-science nonsense pushed in "Expelled" and the “Academic Freedom” bills. It begins by suggesting that we allow schools to fall into decay: “Do not expect students to know the basics of mathematics, chemistry and physics. ... Destroy the knowledge base on which all of mankind's scientific progress has been built ...” It concludes by suggested that we "elevate mysticism, tribalism, shamanism and fundamentalism ... to an equal status with technology in the public mind" and “act as if science were on an equal footing with voodoo.” Ironically, the author of that article was Ben Stein. Perhaps TV game-show contestants won too much of his money and he hopes to boost his overseas investments.

Is this an exaggeration? Is ID creationism really so extreme? Sadly, "Expelled" is only the tip of the iceberg. ID creationists blame evolution for everything from the undermining of social morality to product liability laws. Creationists regularly link evolution with communism. "Expelled" does this in a particularly ham-handed way, speaking of scientists as conspiring like “comrades” and repeatedly flashing images of the Berlin Wall.

And no ideological rant (or Hollywood fantasy) would be complete without linking one's enemies to the Nazis. The climactic section of the movie does just that, blaming Darwinian evolution for Hitler's atrocities, as Stein tours German concentration camps and replays horrific images of the piles of the Dachau dead. Darwinism was a necessary condition for the Holocaust, claims DI Fellow David Berlinski in "Expelled"—without evolutionary science it would not have happened. In an interview last week on Trinity Broadcasting Network, Stein emphasized this central point of the movie. The Holocaust is “where science leads you” he opined. “Love of God and compassion and empathy leads you to a very glorious place, and science leads you to killing people.”

It is hard to know how to respond in a civil manner to such ignorant extremism. Evolution caused the Holocaust? Science leads you to killing people? Is this really
the kind of thing we want to be teaching kids in science classes? Such a view deserves to be expelled.

There are signs that Americans have had enough of this kind of zealotry. A massive campaign by the same firm that marketed "The Passion of the Christ" may have brought out fundamentalists for a while, but I had the theater entirely to myself when I watched "Expelled" just two weeks after it opened. Even political conservatives—most recently Dinesh D’Souza, joining George Will and Charles Krauthammer—are distancing themselves as they learn more about the nature of the ID movement. In a recent National Review article about "Expelled," conservative commentator John Derbyshire minced no words in identifying ID advocates as "liars and fools." And in a federal court case that tested a pro-ID school policy, a Bush-appointed Republican judge listened to ID advocates present their best case and concluded that including ID was not only unconstitutional but nothing less than "breathtaking inanity." Of the six “Academic Freedom” bills, the ones in Alabama, Florida and Missouri have already failed.

Let us hope that Michigan legislators are not deceived by Stein’s propaganda and Moolenaar’s deceptively named bill. With freedom comes responsibility, and it would be the height of academic irresponsibility to allow the shameful dishonesty that is ID creationism into Michigan science classrooms.