

## HOW INTELLIGENT IS THE DESIGN?

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October 9, 2005

Perhaps you have read about the current court case in Dover, Pennsylvania. It's causing quite a stir. Last year, the Dover school board voted to require that high school biology students be told that scientific evolution is only a theory, and that there is another explanation of the origin of life known as "Intelligent Design." Students are being told that a book teaching Intelligent Design is available in the school library, many copies in fact. The title of the book is "Of Pandas and People." Whatever the merits of this book, mainstream biologists say it is bad as science. A number of parents are suing the school district. They are arguing that the Dover school district is introducing religious belief into the teaching of biology.

The controversy is not unique to Dover, Pennsylvania. Similar conflicts are taking place in dozens of school districts across the nation. Ohio, New Mexico, and Minnesota are also requiring that biology students be told about intelligent design as an alternative explanation to Darwinian evolution. Kansas may be next. ("Politicized Scholars Put Evolution on the Defensive," New York Times, 8/21/05, pg.1).

So, what is going on here? What is at stake? And what do we as religious liberals have to say about it?

First, we need to understand what Intelligent Design is. Intelligent Design is a religious doctrine about the origin of life cloaked in scientific sounding language. It is being promoted by some very smart people, some of whom are at the Discovery Institute in Seattle, with substantial funding from certain religious conservatives, and with a political agenda. Unlike

Creationism, which says the world and all life was created in six days about 6,000 years ago just like it says in Genesis, Intelligent Design is not Biblical literalism. It does not reject evolution. It admits that life has evolved over hundreds of millions of years. But it says that living organisms are too complex to be explained by evolution alone. It says there must have been a Designer.

Imagine something as simple as a mousetrap. It is hard to imagine that something even as simple as this to have happened entirely by chance without the hand of a designer. Just so, these folks say, there must be a supernatural designer at work in the origin of life. Their argument is more sophisticated than this, but this is the essential idea. Intelligent design advocates do not actually name the designer. But you can fill in the blank. They do this deliberately in order to get in under the radar of the separation of church and state. They say they are opening up a new frontier in science, to be taught as science. Therefore they are demanding academic freedom to teach what they claim to be an alternative scientific idea. But Intelligent Design is not a scientific idea. It cannot be tested by scientific observation. It is a religious claim to be taken on faith. It is a deliberate attempt to undermine the science of evolution biology.

Now, let's take a moment to refresh our memories as to the key ideas of scientific evolution biology. There are two key ideas. First, in each generation of a living organism variations can happen. While most variations may be of little consequence, and many are for the worse, every once in a while a variation happens that gives the new organism some comparative advantage. For example, a bird is hatched with a slightly different shape to its beak which makes it slightly easier to peck out a certain seed. A bacterium divides and one of the new pair has a slightly higher

resistance to a particular drug, say penicillin. So, the first observation is that variation happens and that these variations are passed on to the next generation, if the organism survives to reproduce.

This brings us to the second key observation. Natural pressures within the environment will work over time to cause organisms with an advantageous variation to survive and reproduce in greater numbers than those organisms without the variation. Or the environment may change in ways that make a particular variation a necessity for survival. The bird with the new type of beak can compete more effectively for a particular kind of seed. It has a better chance of surviving and reproducing by feeding on that particular seed than birds without that new type of beak. This is what Darwin observed to have happened among the finches on the Galapagos Islands.

The bacterium with enhanced penicillin immunity has a better chance of surviving an encounter with a penicillin molecule than its fellows. With time, a new bacterium species will develop which is completely immune to penicillin. Health officials take Darwinian evolution very seriously.

These two key principles – inheritable variation and natural selection – these are the two key ideas that are at the heart of evolutionary theory. There is a huge wealth of evidence in support of evolution. It comes from the fossil record, from observing variation and natural selection at work among butterflies, bacteria and viruses, from the discovery of DNA as the means of inheritance, and from seeing the stunning similarities between human and animal genomes. Evolutionary theory today is one of the most well established theories in modern science. There are still, of course, many good scientific problems to work out, as with most scientific theories. But evolutionary biology has proved remarkably powerful in its ability to

explain a wide diversity of natural phenomena and to predict as yet unobserved phenomena.

Explanation and prediction are two hallmarks of a good scientific theory. Intelligent Design does neither. The religious concept of a supernatural Designer has no bearing on evolution as a scientific theory, because it explains nothing, it predicts nothing, and it cannot be tested by scientific method.

Now, all this does not mean that there is an inherent conflict between religion and science, when religion and science are rightly understood. Science and religion are concerned with different aspects of reality. Science studies material reality, how things work as they do. Religion, on the other hand, is concerned about questions of meaning, value, and purpose. These are important questions which are beyond the scope of science as science. For a holistic understanding of our lives, we need both. And both can be true at the same time. There is also overlap. Science raises questions of social ethics that religion is called on to help answer. Science also inspires new religious thinking about who we are and our place in the universe. For its part, religious intuition of the deep mystery of the cosmos and of our own being can motivate scientific research. But science and religion remain two very different human enterprises, with different purposes, different methods and different criteria for truth. Scientists can be religious people; and religious people can be scientists.

The problem comes when certain people make a dogmatism out of an idea and then seek to impose that dogmatism on others. This, I believe, is what the controversy in Dover, Pennsylvania, is all about. It is about the conflict between two religious dogmatisms – the dogmatism of Intelligent Design versus a dogmatism argued by certain scientists, certainly not all scientists,

who say that material evolution is all that there is. Intelligent design folks want to impose their dogmatism of a supernatural designer on biology and destroy biology as a science. On the other hand, certain evolutionary biologists are equally dogmatic in their claim that material reality is all that there is. They argue that natural selection is all that there is, period, that there is nothing more, that we human beings together with our psychology and culture arose by random material processes and that there is no higher meaning or purpose. These folks disdain any religious belief as pathetic ignorance. However, they fail to realize that their own materialism is itself a dogmatic religious belief. It is the very thing they disdain.

Dogmatism certainly has no place in science. It is contrary to the spirit of science which holds that all ideas are contingent and subject to observation, testing, and possible revision. Dogmatism is also contrary to the spirit of religion and has no place within a mature religious faith, which is always open to new insight and deeper wisdom.

Intelligent Design fails on several counts. First, it is a dogmatism and therefore it fails both as a scientific theory and as religious belief. Second, Intelligent Design fails as science because it seeks to explain natural phenomena with an *unnatural* cause, a cause which is a dogmatic assertion which cannot be tested or challenged. And thirdly, Intelligent Design is bad theology. It is bad theology because it makes God in the image of a humanly contrived, fixed idea. This is a form of the idolatry which major religions have warned against for thousands of years. Anyway, the idea of a Designer God is not necessary to religious faith, just as the idea of watchmaker God from an earlier century was not necessary – either for science or religion.

In the same way, those evolutionists who deny there is any reality beyond a hard-minded materialism are also guilty of bad theology. They, too, are guilty of idolatry. They, too, are making ultimate reality in the image of a humanly contrived fixed idea, which they call, as it were, “Evolution *only*.” It is the word “only” that causes the problem. It is also bad science when they claim in the name of science the non-existence of God. Such a claim in fact is a religious claim, not a scientific one.

So the conflict is between two religious dogmatisms – Intelligent Design and Evolution Only. The Evolution Only folks have held considerable sway in academia and public policy circles for many years. Their contempt for other religious understandings has caused deep resentment in the larger society. Indeed, the rise of Intelligent Design dogma in many ways is a reaction to the dogmatic attitude of the “evolution only” folks. Bad things happen in such a cultural conflict. The political process becomes a religious battleground resulting in government policy that ignores or distorts science to fit political agendas. This has dire consequences for wise public policy regarding the natural environment, global warming, public health, energy, and so forth. Such a conflict fosters an unfortunate misunderstanding of both religion and science. Of course, there are other issues at stake. Science educators rightly are fighting to keep the teaching of science as science and not to confuse it and distort it by introducing religious beliefs in the guise of science. Many religious people, for their part, lament that religion is entirely excluded from public education except for the implied religious dogmatism of materialism.

Yet, at the same time, there is something to the idea of design that as spiritual beings we cannot ignore. From ancient times, people have looked at nature and have been astounded by its beauty, pattern and order –

snowflakes, leaves, flowers, the motion of the planets, and the amazing perfection and complexity of the living organisms. This perception has inspired religious poetry and art for thousands of years. The psalmist looked at the heavens and declared, “the firmament proclaims (thy) handiwork.” Modern science confirms that natural phenomena are indeed governed by an underlying and beautifully patterned system of physical laws, whose origin remains a mystery. As human beings, we also intuit the reality of a moral order of being which has implications for our social and spiritual well being. If we claim that we as human beings are intelligent then we have to say that the universe itself is intelligent inasmuch as you and I are a product at least in part of the universe. Something profound and amazing is going on in this universe. And it is more than any simple dogmatism can begin to describe.

As religious liberals, we embrace the search for truth, both religious truth and scientific truth. Both teach something important about the larger reality of our existence and nature of our being. We strive to stay clear of dogmatisms that stultify our creative powers of imagination. So, let us look to science for what it teaches about natural reality and how it can inform our living. But let us also look to religion for the deeper purposes and meanings by which we have our life in all its beauty, fullness and joy.