



Intelligent Design and Evolution

Though The New American has no official position on evolution, we have published a number of articles over the years pointing to flaws in the theory and arguing for academic freedom on the subject. We did this most recently in "Allow Intelligence" (May 12, 2008 issue), our very favorable review of Ben Stein's documentary Expelled. In the following article, Selwyn Duke suggests that it's possible to believe in both an evolution of sorts (though not Darwinism) and Intelligent Design, though he does not stake out a position in favor of evolution. We publish it here as food for thought. — Ed.



While the debate over evolution in schools has been developing for many years in a primordial soup of passion, generally speaking, it hasn't reached a very high level of complexity. The opponents of Intelligent Design Theory (ID) tend to dismiss its advocates as serpent-handling dogmatists who make a sport of spitting on Galileo's grave, while *some* at the opposite end of the spectrum may portray anyone entertaining evolution in any context as the serpent in Eden.

But what is often overlooked in this debate — so much so that it may surprise some people — is that not all those who entertain ID are religious. As an example, consider New York University law and philosophy professor Thomas Nagel, an avowed atheist who wrote an essay entitled "Public Education and Intelligent Design." In it he makes the case for including ID in school curricula, writing:

The political urge to defend science education against the threats of religious orthodoxy, understandable though it is, has resulted in a counterorthodoxy, supported by bad arguments, and a tendency to overstate the legitimate scientific claims of evolutionary theory.... It would be unfortunate if the Establishment Clause made it unconstitutional to allude to these questions [concerning problems with evolution] in a public school biology class, for that would mean that evolutionary theory cannot be taught in an intellectually responsible way.

The professor points out a truth, that religious people don't have a monopoly on dogmatism. Yet he understates the matter. In point of fact, today it is the case that evolutionists are the most stubborn of dogmatists. I say this because while there are many religionists who will consider that evolution may be the vehicle through which God created life, very few evolutionists will consider that God might have created evolution. The reason for this has great bearing on the matter of evolution in schools and will be discussed later. First, however, I would like to delve into the perspective that allows a Christian to entertain evolution. That is, evolution in a certain *sense*.

As a man of faith, I firmly believe God created life. Yet believing He worked a certain miracle is not synonymous with knowing *how* He worked it. In fact, if you read the Bible, there is little if any explanation of the "how," only the "what." For instance, the New Testament tells us that Jesus turned water into wine, not how he did it. And for good reason. As evangelist Pat Robertson once said when referring to the origin-of-life debate, "Genesis was never intended as a science textbook." (This, of



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course, applies to the whole of Scripture.) Now, while Robertson is a contemporary figure, this view is nothing of the sort; it is in fact the traditional Christian position. In his piece "Does the Bible Teach Science?" medieval studies scholar and creator of an award-winning "Science and faith" course Dr. Robert J. Schneider explains:

From the early years of the Christian church until the beginning of the seventeenth century, the most respected theologians who thought about and wrote on the nature of biblical inspiration and authority and also about the doctrine of creation held a common position about the relationship between the Bible and science. In the early seventeenth century, Cardinal Baronius expressed this principle succinctly:

"The intention of the Holy Spirit is to teach us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go."
(quoted in Galileo 186)

Baronius had the conflict over the Copernican theory in mind. He was challenging the argument that this theory must be wrong because the Bible teaches that the sun moves, not the earth (e.g., Josh 10:13, Ps. 19:6; 96:10). Baronius' statement is fully in accord with the perspective of those who developed the classic Christian theology of creation (essay II). Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin were one in their conviction that Christ is the center of Scripture, and that what the Holy Spirit through Scripture means to teach is the message of salvation through Christ. The Bible's teachings about God and the Christian life may be confidently accepted as completely true and trustworthy.

I would echo Baronius and also say, the Bible is there to teach us how to live life, not how life came to live. Having said this, I would nevertheless like to make a case that a belief in evolution (depending on how "evolution" is defined) does not rule out faith or Intelligent Design. Note that I do *not* state the following definitively, but merely as food for thought.

Genesis 2:7 tells us, "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." As for evolutionists, they say that life first arose in the primordial soup, which refers to the hot oceans of billions of years past. There doesn't seem to be much common ground between these two visions, but is that really true?

We have all seen that accelerated video footage of a flower blooming before our eyes or clouds racing across the sky. Ah, how modern technology can make the ordinary appear just a tad miraculous. Or, is it that our modernistic perception has made the miraculous seem ordinary? Regardless, let us assume for argument's sake that life evolved, that beasts ascended from the muck and man from beasts. If you then took all the Earth's history from the time it was a lifeless orb to now (some 4.5 billion years according to expert opinion), and accelerated it so that the "evolution" would have occurred in the blink of an eye, what would you see? Among other things, would you not behold man rising from the muck and instantly coming to flower? For the human eye would not perceive the stages, only the end result. Now, isn't this at least vaguely reminiscent of Genesis' description? Could it not be said that the main difference is that the creation story provides fewer details about the process but the answer as to what — or who — initiated it?

The obvious objection to this thesis is that, whatever the impetus behind it, the development of life took a very, very long time. Yet this is without foundation, because the best of both theologians and scientists agree on a relevant point: time is an invention of man. The early Christian fathers realized long ago that God is outside of time, and Albert Einstein called time "a handy illusion." (This is why time



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seems to pass faster as we age; it is relative and all a matter of perception.) Thus, it is irrelevant if something happened "slowly" or "fast," as the ultimate reality is that everything is "now."

It is because of this reality about our handy illusion that the pace of a miracle is inconsequential; it is because of the reality that we are nonetheless trapped in the handy illusion that such a truth eludes us. The great philosopher G.K. Chesterton once addressed this, writing:

An event is not any more intrinsically intelligible or unintelligible because of the pace at which it moves. For a man who does not believe in a miracle, a slow miracle would be just as incredible as a swift one. The Greek witch may have turned sailors to swine with a stroke of the wand. But to see a naval gentleman of our acquaintance looking a little more like a pig every day, till he ended with four trotters and a curly tail, would not be any more soothing.... The medieval wizard may have flown through the air from the top of a tower; but to see an old gentleman walking through the air, in a leisurely and lounging manner, would still seem to call for some explanation. Yet there runs through all the rationalistic treatment of history this curious and confused idea that difficulty is avoided, or even a mystery eliminated, by dwelling on mere delay or on something dilatory in the process of things.... The ultimate question is why [things] go at all; and anybody who really understands that question will know that it always has been and always will be a religious question; or at any a rate a philosophical or metaphysical question. And most certainly he will not think the question answered by some substitution of gradual for abrupt change.

Yes, for one who does not believe in a miracle, a slow miracle would be just as incredible as a swift one. But, likewise, for those of us who do believe in miracles, a slow miracle should be no less amazing than a swift one.

Having said this, I must reiterate that my little musing regarding Genesis isn't doctrine, either a church's or my own. It's just an idea (and one that could be baseless) illustrating how evolution and faith could be compatible. As a Christian, I believe that God created man in His own image and likeness. That *is* doctrine. As to how He did it, I don't profess to know. But this doesn't bother me because I accept that simple fact of which all Christians need be mindful: the Bible is *not* a scientific treatise. If God had meant to bestow a science textbook upon us, He would have used scientists to write it, not prophets and apostles.

Yet, if there is much the Bible doesn't explain, the same can be said of evolution. (In fact, a belief in evolution requires faith, since the theory is far from proven.) For instance, the process by which life began in the primordial soup would have to be called "abiogenesis," which, as Thomas Henry Huxley said, is the "doctrine that living matter may be produced by not living matter." The idea is that amino acids formed chains and became the first proteins which, after many more evolutionary twists and turns, became the first simple organisms. And from there life continued developing and increasing in complexity. Yet this poses a question: how is it that chemicals can suddenly "decide" to become alive? Moreover, even if they somehow did, why would they have a will to continue living and become more complex? The answer to this question is always the same and is often delivered dismissively. "It's not that simple," we hear. "There were many, many steps and the process took a very, very long time." But this is not an answer, merely a response. To accept it is to fall victim to the fallacy of which Chesterton spoke, to believe that an event is "more intrinsically intelligible or unintelligible because of the pace at which it moves."

In addition, it is also to believe that an exposition of the "steps" of what went on somehow explains the



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ultimate question of why things go at all. But harking back to Chesterton's example from Greek mythology, it's as if we were told that a man was transformed into a pig quite by accident, without the workings of a witch. It all supposedly makes sense, though, because, well, it took pretty dang long and we can explain the steps of the process. Would that satisfy your curiosity?

Ironically, though, while an explanation of the process (the steps) is meant to illuminate, the case may be that it actually blinds. Man can often very easily believe in a miracle precisely *until* the point at which it is explained, but how does this make sense? We are made in God's image and like Him possess intellect — albeit a limited one — so why should it surprise anyone that to some degree we might be able to explain how He worked His miracles? After all, as a child matures, can he not begin to understand more and more about his father's ways? A scientific explanation isn't sufficient cause to demote a thing from the miraculous to the mundane.

Then there is that very compelling argument in favor of ID, that a design implies a *designer*. For instance, for a long time no one could provide any firm ideas about who built the monument of Stonehenge in England. Yet did anyone propose that those ancient rocks were assembled accidentally by the forces of nature? Why, such an idea is so preposterous that it was never even considered. In fact, of all the things known to man that have a design, there is only *one* case where anyone would entertain the notion that there was no designer, the instance of the most amazing design of all: life.

So the question still remains, does ID belong in schools? Well, my answer is that if it does not, evolution certainly doesn't. To understand why, you only need to ponder one of the bases on which the opponents of ID disqualify it from schools. That is, it is a theological message that violates the "separation of church and state" principle. Yet if this is so, evolution is disqualified on the same basis, for it involves an *atheological* message. Dr. Nagel spoke of this as well, writing:

The campaign of the scientific establishment to rule out intelligent design as beyond discussion because it is not science results in the avoidance of significant questions about the relation between evolutionary theory and religious belief....

From the beginning it has been commonplace to present the theory of evolution by random mutation and natural selection as an alternative to intentional design as an explanation of the functional organization of living organisms. The evidence for the theory is supposed to be evidence for the absence of purpose in the causation of the development of life-forms on this planet. It is not just the theory that life evolved over billions of years, and that all species are descended from a common ancestor. Its defining element is the claim that all this happened as the result of the appearance of random and purposeless mutations in the genetic material followed by natural selection due to the resulting heritable variations in reproductive fitness. It displaces design by proposing an alternative.

And this is the point. Evolution treats not just the "what" of life's genesis and development, but also the "why"; that is to say, its explanation is that there is no why, that life is merely a cosmic accident. This is to go beyond science and to tread in — and on — the theological realm.

Pursuing the "why" is a central part of humanity's eternal religious and philosophic strivings. Thus has the question about the origin of man and his world been pondered since time immemorial, and every civilization had its creation stories. And this explains why evolutionists are those most stubborn dogmatists, people who will never, ever consider that God might have initiated and guided evolution, if indeed that's what happened. *By definition*, classical evolution excludes the possibility of God.

And, really, I don't sell evolutionists so short that I believe all of them are oblivious to their intrusion



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upon theological territory. On the contrary, I suspect that a desire to proselytize, to spread this atheological message, is precisely what fuels much of the zeal of the evolutionist movement. For we have to ask whence zeal comes. It isn't the result of cold, detached scientific curiosity but of something more reminiscent of religious fervor. And if it truly isn't quasi-religious devotion, why not just agree that schools should remain neutral on the matter, that both ID and evolution should be stricken from them? This is, after all, what we have done with other controversial issues of the day, such as abortion.

This is where evolutionists will protest that the scope of school curricula should not be limited by dogma, but this is an intellectually dishonest argument. First, students can be taught only a minuscule percentage of man's knowledge, so we must necessarily exclude most of it when devising curricula. And why should evolution be part of this extremely limited program? Have you ever been asked about fossil records during a job interview? We should realize that people who will actually pursue a career in which such study is relevant are about as rare as those who will become nuclear physicists. So if nuclear physics isn't a staple of curricula, why is evolution?

What I'm pointing out is that even insofar as evolution may be valid, people have been snookered, conditioned to accept that it enjoys status as an academic basic. But do you remember those exercises on tests in which we had to choose which element of a group was out of place? Let us try one here: math, history, English, evolution — which doesn't belong? Here some may say that it is part of science, but, again, even insofar as it may be valid, it is a *specialty*. It's about as relevant to the scientific studies of average schoolchildren as the origin of English is to their study of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. So, given that it has no practical application in their lives, why is there this obsession with having it in school? Because it's very practical if your goal is the promotion of a certain world view.

Then there is the sanctimony. Those who protest that a school curriculum's scope must not be limited by religious dogma will simultaneously limit it to the "secular" in the name of secular dogma. They will say that you must not place limits on where science will take you, until it takes you to the possibility that God exists. Off limits is any honest treatment of the question of what sparked life in the first place. Off limits is the interpretation of an anomaly of the natural world that a biology teacher of mine once said, with the requisite schoolhouse subtlety, pointed to the existence of a god. He was speaking of the phenomenon whereby water is the only non-metallic substance in which the solid form floats in the liquid. It impressed him so because, he averred, life could not exist were it not for the peculiarity. And even Plato would have to run afoul of the secular thought police, since he theorized that a rational god created the Universe. All these things and many other fruits of intellectual inquiry are forbidden because the line has quite tendentiously been traced around evolution and its atheological implications.

Some may say that what I've mentioned is a bit too far afield, not at all the stuff of basic school curriculum. But, as I've demonstrated, it's no less basic than evolution itself. And if evolutionists claim that integrity demands we follow intellectual inquiry wherever it takes us, why do we abandon this principle when it takes us away from evolutionary dogma? We should be just as conscientious about philosophical pursuits as scientific ones, especially when the latter tread upon and render messages about philosophical ground.

At the end of the day, though, the real issue is more fundamental than the debate over ID versus evolution. That debate is, in fact, just a front in a war. The real battle concerns *truth* versus agendas. We are blinded by terminology, such as "religious" and "secular" (which wasn't first recorded till 1846), and ascribe significance to it. Then we say that depending on how we label a thing, it may or may not enter the public sphere. But we don't ask the only relevant question: *is it true?* Moreover, if ideas in



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question really do come from God, the Creator of the Universe, if they are absolutely true, don't we have an obligation to instill them in children in school? Of course, this is where secularists will respond, "Well, you may be convinced they were born in Heaven, but not everyone agrees with you; some believe they are just man-made." But then I ask, if they are man-made just like secular ideas, why do you discriminate against them? Why do you say that ideas we happen to call "secular" may be in government schools, but those we happen to call "religious" may not be? If they're all man-made, wherein lies the difference? Besides, whether or not what "religious" or "secular" represents is man-made, the labels themselves — which so many attach such importance to — most certainly are.

Of course, the above perspective may be lost on "constitutional scholars" who wax Hugo Black about the First Amendment. So, while this piece hasn't directly treated the legal issues, I will make a brief statement about them. If presenting a theory indicating that life had some kind of designer — without reference to identity or sect — is "the establishment of religion," then presenting one indicating there was no designer is "prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Both claims are equally logical — and equally ridiculous.

In the final analysis, modern man's thinking hasn't evolved, but devolved. Real academic integrity consists of doggedly searching for truth, without regard for superficial labels or supercilious judges' rulings. One who does otherwise may be abiding by lexical or legal strictures, but he is in no way a thinker. He is simply a dead-end intellectual species, one that can never, ever arise from the muck and mire of its materialistic creed.



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