

New paradigm needed: More intelligent 'intelligent design'

Friday, January 07, 2005 - Gregor Mendel was a 19th-century Augustinian monk whose studies of inheritance patterns in garden peas laid the initial foundations for what is today the burgeoning field of genetics.

Mendel, like many of the earliest scientists was a devout individual of faith, believing that science could do nothing but strengthen one's belief in God. After all, if God was the creator, everything in the created order, from the smallest chemical elements up to and including life itself, was simply a revelation of his amazing creative genius.

But an unexpected development occurred along the road to the 21st century: Science began to discover that many things once thought to be solely in the domain of "supernatural" were readily explainable by purely "natural" processes.

Nowhere were the ramifications of these observations more apparent than during the Scopes trial of 1925, where science and evolution were pitted as being the antithesis to belief in a supreme intelligence.

More recently, public school boards from Kansas to Wisconsin, and Georgia to Ohio and Pennsylvania, have found themselves faced with controversy and/or court battles over the creation/evolution issue as it has been framed.

Fueled by bold, but unsupportable atheistic pronouncements from a few scientists that science and evolution render God superfluous, and reinforced by a continuous barrage of heated anti-evolution rhetoric flowing from scientifically naive creationist voices over many years, this idea of mutual exclusivity has seemingly become entrenched as the prevailing premise in contemporary American culture.

In short, one can believe in God *or* science, but never shall the twain meet.

The tension that exists on this issue, particularly as it relates to public science education, is easy to understand. Scientists are suspicious that Christians are trying to insert religious beliefs into science, an idea absolutely abhorrent to them. They recognize that science must be free; not subject to religious veto.

On the other hand, many Christians fear that science is bent on removing God from the picture altogether -- starting in the public school classroom -- a direction equally unacceptable to them. They understand that when scientists make definitive pronouncements regarding ultimate causes, the legitimate boundaries of science have been exceeded.

But in recent years, the climate has begun to shift as a growing number of scientists and theologians have come to understand that life is far more complex and improbable than previously thought, and also that science and faith are not necessarily mutually exclusive propositions.

Enter intelligent design, the latest attempt of some conservative Christian groups to reinstate God into the scientific equation of life. As a committed Christian, I certainly appreciate the Dover Area school board's desire to keep the concept of a creator-god in the educational picture. If carefully and openly crafted, I think there is a place for this idea -- yes, even in a science classroom.

However, in my view, as a measure that promotes sound science while preserving the long-term viability of faith, intelligent design, as it is currently understood, fails both tests.

I strongly recommend that the Dover school board reconsider their decision to incorporate intelligent design in the school curriculum. There are several reasons why it seems prudent to do so.

---Intelligent design is a relatively new idea, and has therefore not been subjected to the type of critical scrutiny normally required for inclusion in science education curriculum. In addition, it provides no data and leads to no testable hypotheses. Nor does it possess any significant predictive value that could be compared to empirical observations -- a characteristic normally associated with any sound scientific model.

---As a consequence of the previous point, intelligent design is not a recognized concept or process within the general scientific community. Even among the most conservative Christian biologists, many think there is insufficient data to warrant its inclusion as a mechanism of creation.

---Intelligent design's links to creationism are currently too strong. An inherent test for this link is typically evident in the language of education proposals. If the wording describes intelligent design as open to all truth discovered in science, then I think it has a chance to make an important contribution.

However, if intelligent design is primarily described as an alternative to evolution (as appears to be the case in Dover), its proponent's true underlying motive -- opposition to evolution -- becomes clearly evident. In this context, intelligent design looks more like a first cousin of Biblical creationism, and should be vigorously avoided.

---Intelligent design may or may not fall under the umbrella of separation of church and state, depending on how it is defined and/or taught. I am not a legal scholar, but it seems to me that the Supreme Court's 1987 decision leaves a window for a supreme intelligence, so long as it does not promote a particular religious belief over another.

Nevertheless, these questions should be clarified and clearly understood by everyone involved before something so poorly defined as the current intelligent design model is incorporated into science curriculum.

---If the goal is to preserve an element of faith in the classroom, intelligent design provides but a temporary solution by positing an intelligent designer to explain perceived gaps in current scientific understanding. Such an approach is fraught with liability, and actually counterproductive to the stated purpose.

If history has any lesson for us, it is this: As understanding in science and biology inexorably march on, the perceived scientific mysteries of today will give way to well-understood processes tomorrow. And as this inevitability unfolds, science will incrementally, yet systematically erase the prospects of a designer -- one data point at time.

Finally, the inclusion of intelligent design as a potential "alternative" to evolution continues to promote the very unscientific and unsupportable premise that evolution could not possibly be the product of a higher intelligence, thus furthering the non-productive either/or fallacy that has plagued this discussion for decades.

As a microbiologist, I recognize that the scientific study of life does not have to be a religious endeavor as it was for Gregor Mendel. But it can be. Personally, I find that new discoveries and understanding in science heighten my faith rather than diminish it.

But regardless of one's motive for studying science, it seems to me that science and religion ultimately have a common goal -- the search for truth. There is no legitimate reason for Christians or others of faith to fear or deny science.

No doubt, there are many perspectives on this thorny issue. However, my sincere hope is that the entire debate will soon be redirected into more positive and productive directions. I am not opposed to intelligent design *per se*, but a new and better approach is needed.

This new paradigm must be a more intelligent intelligent design, one that frees science to pursue truth *wherever* it leads, while also providing a permanent place at the table for the possibility of a creator.

Anything less does a disservice to both science and faith.

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