

Intelligent Design and Creationism Just Aren't the Same

by John G. West, Jr.

Recent news accounts about controversies over evolution in Ohio and Georgia have contained references to the scientific theory of "intelligent design." Some advocates of Darwinian evolution try to conflate "intelligent design" (ID) with "creationism," sometimes using the term "intelligent design creationism." (1) In fact, intelligent design is quite different from "creationism," as even some of its critics have acknowledged. University of Wisconsin historian of science Ronald Numbers is critical of intelligent design, yet according to the Associated Press, he "agrees the creationist label is inaccurate when it comes to the ID movement." Why, then, do some Darwinists keep trying to identify ID with creationism? According to Numbers, it is because they think such claims are "the easiest way to discredit intelligent design." (2) In other words, the charge that intelligent design is "creationism" is a rhetorical strategy on the part of those who wish to delegitimize design theory without actually addressing the merits of its case.

In reality, there are a variety of reasons why ID should not be confused with creationism:

1. "Intelligent Design Creationism" is a pejorative term coined by some Darwinists to attack intelligent design; it is not a neutral label of the intelligent design movement.

Scientists and scholars supportive of intelligent design do not describe themselves as "intelligent design creationists." Indeed, intelligent design scholars do not regard intelligent design theory as a form of creationism. Therefore to employ the term "intelligent design creationism" is inaccurate, inappropriate, and tendentious, especially on the part of scholars and journalists who are striving to be fair. "Intelligent design creationism" is not a neutral description of intelligent design theory. It is a polemical label created for rhetorical purposes. "Intelligent design" is the proper neutral description of the theory.

2. Unlike creationism, intelligent design is based on science, not sacred texts.

Creationism is focused on defending a literal reading of the Genesis account, usually including the creation of the earth by the Biblical God a few thousand years ago. Unlike creationism, the scientific theory of intelligent design is agnostic regarding the source of design and has no commitment to defending Genesis, the Bible or any other sacred text. Instead, intelligent design theory is an effort to empirically detect whether the "apparent design" in nature observed by biologists is genuine design (the product of an organizing intelligence) or is simply the product of chance and mechanical natural laws. This effort to detect design in nature is being adopted by a growing number of biologists, biochemists, physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers of science at American

colleges and universities. Scholars who adopt a design approach include biochemist Michael Behe of Lehigh University, microbiologist Scott Minnich at the University of Idaho, and mathematician William Dembski at Baylor University. (3)

3. Creationists know that intelligent design theory is not creationism.

The two most prominent creationist groups, Answers in Genesis Ministries (AIG) and Institute for Creation Research (ICR) have criticized the intelligent design movement (IDM) because design theory, unlike creationism, does not seek to defend the Biblical account of creation. AIG specifically complained about IDM's "refusal to identify the Designer with the Biblical God" and noted that "philosophically and theologically the leading lights of the ID movement form an eclectic group." Indeed, according to AIG, "many prominent figures in the IDM reject or are hostile to Biblical creation, especially the notion of recent creation...." (4) Likewise, ICR has criticized ID for not employing "the Biblical method," concluding that "Design is not enough!" (5) Creationist groups like AIG and ICR clearly understand that intelligent design is not the same thing as creationism.

4. Like Darwinism, design theory may have implications for religion, but these implications are distinct from its scientific program.

Intelligent design theory may hold implications for fields outside of science such as theology, ethics, and philosophy. But such implications are distinct from intelligent design as a scientific research program. In this matter intelligent design theory is no different than the theory of evolution. Leading Darwinists routinely try to draw out theological and cultural implications from the theory of evolution. Oxford's Richard Dawkins, for example, claims that Darwin "made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist." (6) Harvard's E.O. Wilson employs Darwinian biology to deconstruct religion and the arts. (7) Other Darwinists try to elicit positive implications for religion from Darwin's theory. The pro-evolution National Center for Science Education (NCSE) has organized a "Faith Network" to promote the study of evolution in churches. Eugenie Scott, executive director of the NCSE, acknowledges that the purpose of the group's "clergy outreach program" is "to try to encourage members of the practicing clergy to address the issue of Evolution in Sunday schools and adult Bible classes" and to get church members to talk about "the theological implications of evolution." (8) The NCSE's "Faith Network Director" even claims that "Darwin's theory of evolution...has, for those open to the possibilities, expanded our notions of God." (9) If Darwinists have the right to explore the cultural and theological implications of Darwin's theory without disqualifying Darwinism as science, then ID-inspired discussions in the social sciences and the humanities clearly do not disqualify design as a scientific theory.

5. Fair-minded critics recognize the difference between intelligent design and creationism.

Scholars and science writers who are willing to explore the evidence for themselves are coming to the conclusion that intelligent design is different from creationism. As

mentioned earlier, historian of science Ronald Numbers has acknowledged the distinction between ID and creationism. So has science writer Robert Wright, writing in Time magazine: "Critics of ID, which has been billed in the press as new and sophisticated, say it's just creationism in disguise. If so it's a good disguise. Creationists believe that God made current life-forms from scratch. The ID movement takes no position on how life got here, and many adherents believe in evolution. Some even grant a role to the evolutionary engine posited by Darwin: natural selection. They just deny that natural selection alone could have driven life all the way from pond scum to us." (10)

Whatever problems the theory of intelligent design may have, it should be allowed to rise or fall on its own merits, not on the merits of some other theory.

- (1) For a particularly egregious example of use of this term, see *Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert T. Pinnock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).
- (2) Richard Ostling, AP Writer, March 14, 2002.
- (3) For good introductions to intelligent design theory, see Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (The Free Press, 1996); Michael Behe, William Dembski, and Stephen Meyer, *Science & Evidence For Design in the Universe* (Ignatius, 2000); William Dembski, *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); and *Unlocking the Mystery of Life* video documentary (Illustra Media, 2002).
- (4) Carl Wieland, "AiG's views on the Intelligent Design Movement," August 30, 2002, available at <http://www.answersingenesis.org>.
- (5) Henry M. Morris, "Design is not Enough!", Institute for Creation Research, July 1999, available at: <http://www.icr.org/>.
- (6) Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996), 6.
- (7) E.O. Wilson, *Consilience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).
- (8) Eugenie Scott, interview with ColdWater Media, September 2002. Courtesy of ColdWater Media.
- (9) Phina Borgeson, "Introduction to the Congregational Study Guide for Evolution," National Center for Science Education, 2001, available at www.ncseweb.org.
- (10) Robert Wright, *Time*, March 11, 2002.

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