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FEATURE STORY: INTELLIGENT DESIGN

Faith-based Science?

Intelligent Design

Is Not Science

by Roger Wilson, PhD

*How many legs does a dog
have if you call the tail a leg?
Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn't
make it a leg.*

—Abraham Lincoln

The struggle to have faith-informed interpretations of the origin of life become part of the K-12 science curricula continues. These interpretations have ranged from literal creationism (Genesis) to the seemingly more sophisticated, and recent, intelligent design (ID). But notwithstanding the appearance of explanatory sophistication, the intentional ambiguity surrounding its “designer,” or the recent musings by President Bush that such explanations should be aired in the public schools, ID is not science and so has no place in the science curricula of Michigan’s public schools.

Presently, the Dover Area School District in Pennsylvania is involved in a court case because last year its school board approved a policy calling for the reading of a statement in ninth grade biology classes promoting intelligent design as a viable alternative to evolutionary theory. The result has been a lawsuit brought by the ACLU on behalf of a group of eight families. Interestingly, the school district is represented pro bono by the Thomas More Law Center (TMLC) in Ann Arbor, “a not-for-profit public interest law firm dedicated to the defense and promotion of the religious freedom of Christians” (TMLC website). For its part, the ACLU called upon MSU professor Robert Pennock to testify. Pennock, a faculty member in the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and Behavior Program, is an ardent critic of creationist science, a nationally known expert on the evolution/creationism controversy and ID in particular, and founder of Michigan Citizens for Science (michigancitizensforscience.org), an organization whose function is “to assist legislators and school administrators in maintaining the integrity of science education.”

The battle between evolution and creationism has some legal history in America. The Scopes

Monkey Trial (Tennessee v John Scopes) in 1925 was perhaps the most famous. Unlike today, Scopes, a high school biology teacher, was tried and initially found guilty for illegally teaching the theory of evolution. Tennessee had passed its evolution statutes which prevented the state’s publicly-funded schools, including universities and normal schools (teachers’ colleges), from instructing “any theory that denies the story of divine creation as taught by the Bible.” It was not until 1968 that the U.S. Supreme Court finally considered a case (Epperson v Arkansas) challenging a similar law in Arkansas dating back to 1928 that made it unlawful “to teach the theory or doctrine that mankind ascended or descended from a lower order of animals.” The Supreme Court ruled against Arkansas. It held that the “law’s effort was confined to an attempt to blot out a particular theory because of its supposed conflict with the Biblical account, literally read” and that the First and Fourteenth Amendments had been violated.

Such laws and their wording were a reflection of the times. Thus, biblical literalism needed to morph, to become more ambiguous, even pseudo-scientific, to appear more legally palatable in the present thereby drawing less attention to itself where matters of school curriculum were involved. Hence, creation science and its offspring, intelligent design evolved. However, creation science, by the very nature of its label, connotes a marriage of faith or religion and science. But science, by definition, cannot address explanations of changes in the natural world derived from the consequence of something transcendent. Yet that has not deterred those who oppose the curricular dominance of evolution in science. Rather than have the theory of evolution precluded from instruction, modern proponents of creationism either seek equal expression in the curriculum as a viable explanatory alternative for the origin of life. This was the case again in Arkansas in 1981 (McLean v. Arkansas BOE) as well as Louisiana in 1987 (Edwards v. Aguillard). Both attempts ultimately failed. Curiously, Arkansas attempted to argue in court that evolution was itself a religion that violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Louisiana

simply denied instruction of each unless accompanied by the other—a balanced approach. Interestingly, Louisiana had defined creation science as “the scientific evidences for creation and inferences from those scientific evidences.” However, the Supreme Court chose not to address the relationship between creationism and its supposed scientific evidence.

Since the 1980s, Georgia, Kansas, Ohio, Texas even Michigan, to name a few, have either entertained creationist science or ID directly, or implicitly by mandating a critique of evolutionary theory. Each time the attempt has been confronted, though not always with complete success. In 2004, the Ohio State Board of Education “voted to change state science standards, mandating that biology teachers ‘critically analyze’ evolutionary theory.” This is also the tactic employed in Michigan with the recent introduction of House Bill No. 5251. Kansas, having chosen to make evolution instruction optional at the district level in 1999, reversed itself a year later when the state board of education was ousted by the electorate, but now finds itself entertaining a further reversal after yet another electoral shift.

And yet for all these curricular challenges, the scientific evidences at the heart of ID’s attempt at legitimacy remain problematic—there are none. Rather, in their place comes the concept of irreducible complexity (not all systems can be broken down into smaller functioning, thus some “designer”) as well as an imprecise and piecemeal critique of aspects of evolutionary theory that confuses the how with the what. The theory of evolution is not just some conjecture or speculation as the everyday use of the word might imply, but rather it is theory in the full scientific sense of the term. There is over 150 years of tested hypotheses supported by overwhelming observable evidence (facts). The “what” is universally accepted by the scientific community save for very few. It is the particulars of the “how” that remain under debate as interpretations continue to be tested and refined. As one scientist noted, “the response to gaps in scientific knowledge is to do more scientific work, not to postulate God as a mechanism.” ☺