

Cosmic design: Leaving God in the gaps

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Controversies over the teaching of evolution are back in the news. President Bush and a prominent Catholic cardinal have lent their support to the teaching of “intelligent design,” a purportedly scientific alternative to Darwin’s theory of natural selection. The president said he wanted people to “understand what the debate [over evolution] is about.” Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, archbishop of Vienna, said the randomness of natural selection, unguided by any divine intention, clashes with Catholic understandings of providence.

Proponents of intelligent design point to biological systems so complex that the chances of their evolving by a random process is all but nil. They also note gaps in the evolutionary record and surprising leaps in the proliferation of species, and they conclude that evolutionary change must have been supplemented by some sort of guiding hand.

Even those who see ID as bad science can sympathize with its adherents who see in Darwinism a threat to faith. Christians cannot give a free pass to everything presented by scientists. Sometimes scientists overstep the boundaries of their field and rule out religious belief as such—a move that simply begs for religious backlash—or link their findings to pernicious moral or social views. Darwinism has often been paired with philosophies that justify the extermination of “lesser” human communities.

In an effort to be religiously neutral, ID proponents do not explicitly identify the designer as God, but the theological implications of their work are unmistakable. So the movement deserves theological comment and critique.

First, ID operates with a “God in the gaps” approach to science. That which is left unexplained by science is attributed to divine work. The problem with this approach, as modern thinkers have repeatedly found, is that as science shrinks the size of the gaps, God becomes less and less relevant.

ID also points toward a deist vision of God. This designer may create intricate systems, like the human eye or the biochemical conditions for the beginning of life, but is otherwise not much involved in the world. There is quite a difference between the anonymous designer of this deist vision and the God of the scriptures, who elects Israel and becomes incarnate in Christ.

The ID movement also raises in a stark way the problem of evil. Though the cosmos in some cases shows evidence of design, the cosmos can also look quite chaotic. If an intelligent designer is to be invoked when one considers the structure of the eye or the existence of pandas, what about pandemics and tsunamis? If one is looking for evidence of design in the cosmos, one may well see as much evidence for a cosmic sadist as for a benevolent Creator.

That is why Christians have maintained that knowledge of God cannot be gleaned simply by looking at nature. Such investigations must be supplemented by knowledge of God's saving work in Christ as encountered in scripture and through the internal prompting of the Holy Spirit. That knowledge is what enables us to say with the psalmist that "the heavens tell the glory of God." And makes us willing to learn about creation from scientists who may or may not profess belief in a Creator.