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Beyond the Fish Wars

by Jim Burklo
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We've seen the little symbols on the backs of cars. The "Jesus" fish, and the "Darwin" fish. The "Jesus" fish eating the "Darwin" fish. The "Darwin" fish eating the "Jesus" fish. It makes for entertainment while commuting, but this front of the "culture wars" won't be won or lost on the freeway.

The creationists realized that they were not getting enough traction in their bumpersticker campaign against the theory of evolution. So biblical literalists have come up with a new strategy: leave the word "God" out of the public argument, and come up with one that sounds more scientific. It's called "intelligent design". The President has endorsed it as one of the scientific theories of cosmic origins that should be taught in public schools. But it isn't a theory at all. "Intelligent design" posits that the structure of life is so complex and delicate that it is unimaginable that it could have come into existence without having been designed by some intelligent force. Therefore such an intelligence must be responsible for it. But this is a conclusion that can be reached only by assuming that it is true in the first place -- a classic tautology, or example of circular reasoning, which has no place in science. It is not a theoretical alternative to evolution, because it suggests no other credible means by which this outside intelligence ! created the complexity of life. There is nothing in the theory of evolution, the only one that holds any water in explaining the origin of the species, that proves or disproves the existence of such an intelligent "designer". Even if one thinks of God as a separate, distinct being that manipulates the universe, "intelligent design" offers no intelligent reason to suggest that evolution wasn't God's chosen instrument of creation.

Circular reasoning doesn't belong in science education. "Intelligent design" is a thinly-veiled and inappropriate attempt to inject religious indoctrination into public schools. If it gets into school science textbooks, it will insult both science and religion.

The complexity of life truly is a wonderment. It's staggering to ponder our own existence, to consider how we came into being over the eons. The theory of evolution is useful in making sense of the process by which life emerges. But it hardly is the last word ! on the subject. Religion does have something to say about it, and it might be reduced down to one word: WOW! Just because you have a tentative explanation for a natural process, that doesn't mean that you have "mastered" it. That doesn't mean you have usurped God's place. Evolution describes a process, but it doesn't offer a meaning or a purpose for it -- such things belong to the subjective realm of our hearts and souls, the realm of religion and spirituality. The theory of evolution doesn't detract from our sense of awe and divine

humility in the face of the miracle that is life. On the contrary. It's even more awesome, even more humbling, even more divinely majestic to consider that all this living diversity emerged from something akin to random trial and error. To consider that a rose is a result of such a prosaic process: what a marvel!

And to think that trial and error, survival of the fittest, led to the human experience of awe ... this, too, is ! divine. How amazing that a relatively simple function could lead to such a profound, powerful sensation? I associate God with my experience of holy wonder, rather than thinking of God as an "intelligent designer" who exists apart from the universe, tinkering with it from afar. Evolution just gives me one more reason to be awestruck.

This "awe-awareness" gives spiritual expression its rightful place alongside scientific exploration. We don't need the non-theory of "intelligent design" to make the claim that science and religion are compatible. God is manifested dramatically in the processes of nature that science relentlessly strives to understand and describe.