

“Don’t Fall For It”

By Harry T. Cook

Was it god or chance? That is one of the many arguments in America’s so-called culture war presently being waged by pundits and posers alike. It’s the argument over intelligent design vs. evolution. To hear some people talk, the scientists are the bad guys who are trying to tear down religion.

A good many scientists I know are members of synagogues, mosques and churches. They are at once attentive to the rites and responsibilities of their various traditions and the pursuit of research in their respective disciplines. They are also trying to avoid the present conflict between evolution and so-called intelligent design, knowing well enough that it is the old apples-and-oranges thing.

A member of my congregation, a pediatric geneticist and lifelong Episcopalian, has never shown the slightest interest in mocking the book of Genesis or using his considerable scientific knowledge to write any god out of the equation. Other acquaintances are engaged in pure research, which requires the amassing and analysis of observable data relevant to their work – data that can be subjected to testing and upon which falsifiable hypotheses may be made.

These people are not asking – at least not in their laboratories or clinics– philosophical questions about how an unseen god, unknowable save by inference from religious text and amorphous sentiment, can possibly have had a metaphorical hand in the appearance or behavior of life forms.

Another acquaintance, a microbiologist, is well aware of the creation texts in Genesis and appreciates, he says, their authors’ attempts to account for why there is something rather than nothing. He says his rabbi tells him that those texts are the products of thinking that is 2500 old. They cannot, therefore, be expected to yield the same understanding of the world as the much later observations of Galileo, Newton, Darwin and Einstein.

The microbiologist just recently prayed the Kaddish for a deceased family member. Every sabbath he recites the Hebrew version of “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is God; the Lord is One.” Yet he yields not an inch to the proposition that intelligent design is an acceptable alternative to evolution, not because he has convinced himself that the god of his religion had nothing to do with the appearance of life forms, but because there exist no observable, verifiable data that can be analyzed and tested to prove or disprove the existence of such a god. He nevertheless pursues the ideals of his religion in the *shul* and his research in the laboratory, experiencing no dissonance whatsoever as a result.

For him and others scientists whom I know, no conflict exists between their academic disciplines and the practice of religion – especially the kind of religion that finds its reason for being in the here and now. The validity of Hillel the Elder’s 2000-year-old admonition to refrain from doing to others what one would hate to be done to oneself –

popularized in Christianity as “the Golden Rule” – is neither relevant to nor dependent upon how life forms came into being or by what agency.

Proponents of intelligent design are determined to attain for it scientific status equal to that of evolution. Persistent as their advocacy is, the fact remains that evolution is an exhaustively tested set of hypotheses which nearly a century and a half’s worth of such testing has, in the eyes of the international community of scientists, elevated to the rank of “theory” – meaning that Charles Darwin’s observations and conclusions have turned out to be the best explanation thus far for how life forms arose and evolved. Scientists true to the scientific method are unable to test the propositions of intelligent design because they have been reached by the deductive method which posits the desired end result and then marshals the data to prove it.

By contrast, the scientific method is inductive; it collects relevant data and sets forth hypotheses the data themselves suggest, reaching conclusions (provisionally, at that) only after rigorous testing to disprove the hypotheses. By his own admission, no one was more surprised than Darwin by what his observations yielded. He did not start out by assembling data to prove an already held belief. He literally sailed off into the unknown and only after observation, some of it random, did he arrive at hypotheses having to do with natural selection.

Ever since the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859 scientists have been testing his hypotheses in order to prove them wrong. More than a century and a half of such testing has not shaken the validity of Darwin’s conclusions, which is why they have earned the status of “theory,” by which term the scientific community does not mean a bright idea some guy had one morning over his cornflakes. A theory in science is the pearl of great price – found after much searching. A theory is like a theorem in geometry: it works so consistently that it can be taken as a given.

This is a plea for people of reason (religious or not) to refrain from being drawn into the argument that proponents of intelligent design are wont to make, *viz*, that their “theory” deserves equal time with Darwin & Co.’s. It does not. Intelligent design is the product of a slick theology masquerading as science. Evolution is the product of painstaking, step-by-step, trial-and-error science. Therefore, evolution and intelligent design do not belong at opposing poles of the same argument.

The Bush Administration aided and abetted by Congress cut funding to the National Science Foundation at the same time as the President himself has stumbled in to the “teach the controversy” trap – either because he doesn’t know any better, which is certainly possible, or as he once again genuflects to his right-wing base which seems intent upon making America into a Third World nation where science is concerned.

This must be resisted.

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