

VITAL Theology

Helping People Think Theologically

Theologians: No Need to Fight Evolution But Scientists Err When Darwinism Becomes Ideology

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The controversy over teaching evolution that has been promoted by proponents of intelligent design (ID) should prompt Christians to think long and hard about the proper roles of science and theology, say theologians interviewed by *Vital Theology*.

Christians, they said, need to affirm both science and faith and to understand the differences between them.

"If one is going to be a public leader of religious faith, one must have a more sophisticated response than the Darwin/Jesus bumper stickers," said Alan G. Padgett, professor of theology at Luther Seminary, in St. Paul, Minn. "Darwin is not an alternative to Jesus Christ. You need to think deeper about the issues."

Some scientists believe that science has destroyed the myth of a God who created the world. When religious people hear such talk, they sometimes believe there must be something wrong with the scientific theory, said Padgett. Often, their response is to fall back on the concept of God as creator.

Straight Thinking

Padgett said the current debates center on two false assumptions.

The first is that evolution must imply that God does not exist.

The second is that there is something wrong with the theory of evolution, so it must be defeated to promote theism.

Both notions are just plain wrong, said Padgett, but that has not kept many Christians from being drawn into battle over them.

"Christians need to get their thinking straight about natural science," said Padgett,

an ordained United Methodist clergyman. "It doesn't tell us about God. It never has."

Basic religious truths are perfectly compatible with anything that can be discovered by science, said Padgett. Problems arise, he said, from poor biblical interpretation.



Alan Padgett

"Christians need to get their thinking straight about natural science. It doesn't tell us about God. It never has."

"What do we mean when we say that the Bible is true?" said Padgett. "Is it factual, literal events? We're going to get in a lot of trouble if we mean that. We need to think in a more open way about that. It doesn't always mean scientific, historical, factual truth."

Mark Graham, assistant professor of theological ethics at Villanova University, said that intelligent design is primarily a matter of theology and has little to do with natural science.

"Science can never tell you what God was up to (before the Big Bang) because that's not verifiable and that can't be tested," said Graham.

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of Communicators**
Member

Vital Theology is published 20
times a year. The newsletter is avail-
able by mail and on the World Wide
Web by annual subscription only at a
rate of \$49 in the United States.

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This special issue on the evolution/intelligent design controversy presented us with a new challenge.

Proponents of intelligent design theory are urging schools to teach the “gaps” in evolutionary theory. They continue to fight hard for recognition in the scientific community and are adamant about distinguishing their theories from scientific creationism.

As always, *Vital Theology's* role is to present theological perspectives on the issue at hand. That means we're not going to rehash the arguments—pro and con—on purely scientific grounds.

Yet every theologian we interviewed was opposed to teaching intelligent design in the public schools as it currently is conceived. That left us with a gap of our own.

Therefore, in the interest of balance, we've supplemented our normal interview format with an opinion piece by William A. Dembski, a leading intelligent design theorist (see Page 5). I hope you'll find it thought provoking.



One reader e-mailed a link to our special issue on Hurricane Katrina to a few hundred of his closest friends. A priest distributed copies to parishioners. The *A.M.E. Herald*, a Web site of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, posted a link to *Vital Theology* and encouraged members to read the entire issue.

To those who shared this special issue with others, we say thanks for the exposure.

Some others were dissatisfied with the substance of our coverage. To them, we say thanks for the feedback.

One complaint was that none of the theologians we interviewed in the lead story presented an alternative to the view that the hurricane exposed racism and insensitivity to the poor. According to this argument, neither poverty nor race was among the chief reasons that those trapped in New Orleans suffered. Rather, the culprits were inadequate evacuation plans and insufficient shelters.

Perhaps our story failed to connect the dots as well as did the theologians who were interviewed. The questions they raised still need to be answered: Who were the people who were not evacuated? Who were the people forced to live in insufficient shelters? What conditions led to this situation?

Another complaint was that in the rush to publish, the newsletter perpetuated a fallacy about violence in the Superdome.

There is little doubt now that early reports of the level of violence in the Superdome were exaggerated. It would have been more accurate had

we written about “chaos inside the Superdome.”

The notion of publishing in a hurry deserves further explanation.

Part of what sets *Vital Theology* apart from other publications is our ability to provide theological insights on news events soon after they occur. This approach will not appeal to some historians who believe that major trends and events can be judged fairly only at a distance of several decades.

Fortunately, some 130 theologians, theological ethicists, interpreters of Scripture, and, yes, church historians have been willing to forgo the historical approach and participate in interviews during our first year and a half of publication. This may not be the usual context in which they work, but it is one in which they have graciously and thoughtfully participated.



We are delighted to be able to publish back-to-back, 12-page issues, each on a single topic. But this effort has put us behind schedule. Look for some shorter issues on multiple topics in coming weeks.

David W. Reid

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Peters: Science Doesn't Invoke God

Divine Actions Remain Invisible to Science

In sorting out the differences between scientific creationism, intelligent design (ID) and evolutionary theory, Ted Peters, a board member of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, Calif., starts with the question of how God acts in the world.

Creationism has God acting at the beginning, establishing the world and all the species that inhabit it at the beginning. It is almost indistinguishable from deism because the natural world is just left on its own thereafter, he said.

Creationists believe in miracles, but that is not a central part of the theory, said Peters.

Intelligent design is not the same as creationism, said Peters, who objects when some critics of ID try to confuse the two terms.

"In the ID case, it's not the creation at the beginning that occupies them, but it is divine intervention along the way. As an intelligent design person, you can presume that change does take place over time. It's just that these leaps to higher complex systems cannot be satisfactorily explained through random mutation and natural selection. You need to have the intervention of a transcendent designer."

According to Peters, that makes intelligent design a theist position.

"Our main objection to intelligent design is that they try to invoke God as primary cause in the domain where it is legitimate to be looking only for secondary causes."

Peters, a systematic theologian at Pacific Theological Seminary and Graduate Theological Institute, both in Berkeley, and a Lutheran clergyman, rejects both creationism and intelligent design.

He and Martinez (Marty) Hewlett, emeritus professor of molecular and cellular biology and medicine at the University of Arizona, lay out their thoughts in the 2003 book, *Evolution from Creation to New Creation*.

They distinguish between primary and secondary causation, a position inherited from St. Thomas Aquinas. In this case, God is the creator of the world who brings the world into existence from nothingness. That is primary cause. Once the world exists, it operates according to secondary causes of natural law and natural phenomena, the domain of natural scientists.

"The scientist does not pose the question of primary causation," said Peters, in a telephone interview.

When scientists say they don't want any miracles in science, that's a perfectly legitimate methodology, he said. But it should not become a materialist ideology, he said.

"Don't deny things that you're not looking for," he said.

"Our main objection to intelligent design is that they try to invoke God as primary cause in the domain where it is legitimate to be looking only for secondary causes," said Peters. "So that's our first theological commitment that distinguishes us over and against intelligent design. It has the advantage of encouraging scientists of staying within their domain of trying to explain things within natural principles without any appeal to the transcendent."

The success or failure of science shouldn't depend on theology, said Peters. "We don't want to build the theological role right in."

In his book, *God—the World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, Peters explains his understanding of God's work in the world as primary cause so that God is responsible for what happens at the secondary level without intervention.

Peters believes that God relates to the world by constantly giving it a future in two ways.

The first is that God is constantly drawing the world from nonbeing to the present moment while the past moment has drifted off into nonbeing.

"What that means is that God is constantly releasing the present moment from the grip of past laws and past phenomena and past causes," said Peters.

Peters and Hewlett believe that understanding fits well with observations of the natural world.

"We can describe all the laws of nature, but the natural world is not deterministic," said Peters. "Just watch a bunch of beavers try to build a dam and you'll see that it is not deterministic."

So what is it that allows the natural world to operate according to laws while the actual events are contingent and open?

Peters and Hewlett say that it is the result of God's constantly providing the world with a new horizon of opportunities.

This understanding of God is similar but not the same as that of Alfred North Whitehead, the process theologian.

God's action is invisible to the world of science, say Peters and Hewlett, but the contingent action of the beaver is quite visible as it decides exactly what step to take next in building a dam.

Peters said this concept addresses one of the inherent



Ted Peters

ID Proponents Battle for Acceptance

Scientific Establishment Resists New Areas of Inquiry

Intelligent design is first and foremost about science, says William A. Dembski, a philosopher and mathematician who is among the intellectual leaders of the intelligent design (ID) movement.

But ID also has theological implications, said Dembski, who recently moved from Baylor University to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he is the Carl F.H. Henry Professor of Theology and Science and director of the seminary's Center for Science and Theology.

New Areas for Inquiry

Dembski and other ID proponents have spent the last decade battling a scientific establishment that, for the most part, refuses to accept their definition of what constitutes good science. Unlike the majority of his colleagues in science, Dembski is eager to open up new areas of inquiry that have heretofore been ruled out of bounds for science.

"I don't think the theory is being treated honestly. There is a controversy. If you read top scientists and what they're saying about the theory, there are lots of criticisms."

Dembski and most theologians are united in opposing the idea that the world consists of nothing beyond the purely material universe. The argument for a material universe omits any room for transcendence and purposiveness beyond matter, energy and the laws of their interaction.

What separates Dembski from many theologians and most scientists is his insistence that metaphysical inquiry is a legitimate part of science.

"I think intelligent design challenges this materialist view, be it metaphysical materialism or methodological materialism," Dembski told *Vital Theology*.

"It says that intelligence is a fundamental causal power in nature. We need (ID) to understand nature right."

The fundamental claim of ID—that there are patterns in nature that signify we are observing the work of intelligence—does not try to explain how those patterns occur.

Intelligent design has no truck with any religion, according to Dembski. It can lead to deism—the belief that God created the world and then essentially left it to work on its own—or to theism, which is defined as any worldview anchored in the belief that there is a God.

How the world came to be is beyond the scope of current intelligent design theory, said Dembski.

"Everything could have conceivably gotten there by the Big Bang," said Dembski. "It could have gotten there by some discreet interventions. It could be by some continuous interventions. It could be that God has placed capacities

in nature that then allow for various forms of complexity to emerge. There are lots of possibilities and that's just from a theistic perspective."

ID Not Christian Only

Some other religious and philosophic traditions have on occasion shown themselves to be open to intelligent design.

Dembski noted that a Buddhist colleague subscribes to intelligent design. ID also has been embraced by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, said Dembski.

Intelligent design does not depend on how one understands God to be

acting in history, said Dembski.

Anthony Flew, the British philosopher and prominent atheist recently accepted the theory of intelligent design and has said this moved him away from atheism, Dembski said. But Flew is not a Christian or even a theist in any traditional sense, he noted. "It's a very deistic conception of things that (Flew) said he is subscribing to."

In the context of science, intelligent design has more to do with epistemology—the point from which one views the world—than with ontology—the claims one holds to be true, according to Dembski.

Teach the Anomalies

Dembski endorses the idea put forward by Philip Johnson that more evolution—not less—should be taught so that students may understand its weaknesses.

Most textbooks adopted by public school systems fail to present the anomalies of evolution, said Dembski.

"It is a very narrow conception of evolutionary theory, a neo-Darwinian theory of evolution" in which the source of variation is held to be "random genetic errors," said Dembski.

"I think it is presented that way because (the scientific establishment) has to present this illusion of consensus because otherwise *these crazy creationists* are going to come in and give us problems," said Dembski. "I don't think the theory is being treated honestly. There is a controversy. If you read top scientists and what they're saying about the theory, there are lots of criticisms."

As evidence of the controversy among mainstream scientists, Dembski cited for *Vital Theology* a passage from the book *The Way of the Cell: Molecules, Organisms and the Order of Life*, by Colorado State University emeritus professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, Franklin M. Harold. As Dembski noted, Harold writes, "... we must concede



William Dembski

Meshing Science and Theology

As for the necessity of meshing science and theology, Dembski argues that both need to have their own integrity and that fruitful connections should be drawn where possible.

But too much of the science-theology dialogue is a one-way communication, in which theology is subservient to the materialist views of science, he said.

"I see process theology, openness-to-God theologies, evolution-as-metaphor-for-theological-insight as misguided," he said.

Dembski believes that even in areas where the science is still in question, theologians too often treat it as inviolable and a wonderful source of theological reflection.

"I think this is why intelligent design has stepped on the toes not just of the scientific community," he said, "but also on the toes of the theological community, because so many theologians think that evolution is the best thing since sliced bread."

Dembski likes to note that Darwin titled his book *The Origin of Species*

rather than *The Origin of Life* because the origin of life was not considered a problem in that era.

"Now we know the origin of life problem is the most difficult problem facing us," said Dembski. "There are many speculative scenarios for how it might have happened but nothing that would count as a theory. It's a very difficult problem and it seems to resist explanations with any sort of materialist accounts. So here you have new discoveries, especially in the last 30 years in microbiology, not just with regard to the origin of life but also with subsequent development and diversification, which indicates that Darwin's theory is fundamentally flawed."

The flaw, he said, is in the extrapolation of small-scale evolutionary changes to massive, coordinated changes that are needed for organ systems that are irreducibly complex. ◀

William Dembski lays out his scientific views on intelligent design in *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance through Small Probabilities*. His theological work on design is *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology*.

that there are presently no Darwinian accounts of the evolution of any biochemical or cellular system, only a variety of wishful speculations."

Dembski did not, however, highlight the first half of that same sentence, where Harold writes, "We should reject, as a matter of principle, the substitution of intelligent design for the dialogue of chance and necessity ..."

Why President Bush Got It Right about ID

By William A. Dembski

President Bush is to be commended for his courage, wisdom, and foresight in publicly supporting the teaching of intelligent design alongside evolution.

Courage—because intelligent design is for now a minority position in science that faces fierce criticism from many in the scientific mainstream (criticism that he himself will now have to face).

Wisdom—because he understands that ideas are best taught not by giving them a monopoly (which is how evolutionary theory is currently presented in all high school biology textbooks) but by being played off against well-supported competing ideas.

Foresight—because he sees that intelligent design holds a winning hand in the scientific debate over biological sciences.

Intelligent design is a winner in the public debate over biological origins not only because it has the backing of powerful ideas, arguments, and evidence but also because it does not turn this debate into a Bible-science controversy. Intelligent design, unlike creationism, is a science in its own right and can stand on its own feet.

Christians need to view this as a strength rather than as a weakness of intelligent design. There is a long tradition in Christian theology that sees God's revelation as coming through "two books": the Book of Nature, which is God's general revelation to all people; and the Book of Scripture, which is God's special revelation to the redeemed.

Accordingly, intelligent design should be understood as the evidence that God has placed in nature to show

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that the physical world is the product of intelligence and not simply the result of mindless material forces. This evidence is available to all apart from the special revelation of God in salvation history as recounted in Scripture.

Creationism, by contrast, takes a particular interpretation of Genesis (namely, it interprets the days of creation as six consecutive 24-hour days occurring roughly 6,000 years ago) and then tries to harmonize science with this interpretation.

Now, it's true that creation was largely the position of the church from the Church Fathers through the Reformers (although there were exceptions, such as Origen and Augustine). Yet, during that time, church teaching also held that the earth was stationary. Psalm 93 states that the earth is established forever and cannot be moved. A literal interpretation of Psalm 93 seems to require geocentrism. And yet every creationist I know accepts the Copernican Revolution.

“Precisely because intelligent design does not turn the study of biological origins into Bible-science controversy, intelligent design is a position around which Christians of all stripes can unite.”

Although acceptance of intelligent design has now gone international and includes scholars of many different religious faiths and philosophical worldviews, among Christian proponents of intelligent design, the majority hold to a non-literal interpretation of Genesis 1. I'm one of them.

In our view, the evidence of cosmology and geology strongly confirms a universe that is not thousands but rather billions of years old. Granted, this raises problems of theodicy: how for instance, does one explain death, disease, and suffering among animals prior to the emergence of humans, whose sin, according to Romans 5, appears responsible for these evils. Yet, in our view, such problems are answerable, whereas the scientific evidence for an old Earth and old universe seems unanswerable.

Precisely because intelligent design does not turn the study of biological origins into Bible-science controversy, intelligent design is a position around which Christians of all stripes can unite. And, indeed, there are creationists who also call themselves design theorists (e.g., Paul Nelson). To be sure, creationists who support intelligent design think it does not go far enough in elucidating the Christian understanding of creation. And they are right!

Intelligent design is a modest position theologically and philosophically. It attributes the complexity and

diversity of life to intelligence but does not identify that intelligence with God or any religious faith or philosophical system. The task for the Christian who accepts intelligent design is therefore to formulate a theology of nature and creation that makes sense of intelligent design in light of one's Christian faith.

Even so, there is an immediate payoff to intelligent design: it destroys the atheistic legacy of Darwinian evolution. Intelligent design makes it impossible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist. This gives intelligent design incredible traction as a tool for apologetics, opening up the God-question to individuals who think that science has buried God.

The evidence for design in biology is now overwhelming. In the last 30 years, advances in molecular biology and the information sciences have revealed that the most basic form of life, the cell, is an automated city complete with miniature motors and engines, digital data storage, signal transduction circuitry, monorails that move packages from one location to another and information processing at a level that human technology has not begun to approximate.

Even the simplest cell is a nano-engineered marvel. Indeed, biologists now need to be engineers to understand life at the subcellular level. Contrast this with Darwin and his contemporaries, who saw the cell as extremely simple—basically, they saw the cell as a blob of Jell-O enclosed by a membrane. No wonder Darwin never addressed the origin of life in his published writings. For him, the origin of life was not a problem. Rather, how life diversified once it got here was for him the problem. That's why he wrote *On the Origin of Species* rather than *On the Origin of Life*.

The theory of intelligent design confronts biology with an immediacy of design that many scientists, committed as many of them are to a materialist worldview, are reluctant to accept. But for true scientists, this reluctance must be justified by evidence and not by an allergic reaction to design that is the result of cultural conditioning.

Twenty years ago, Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins asserted that “the evidence of evolution reveals a universe without design.” A lot has happened since then, with the evidence of biology now revealing a universe chock-full of design. President Bush is therefore completely on target in wanting intelligent design taught in the public school science curriculum. ◀

This article is reprinted with permission. It originally appeared at www.designinference.com, a Web site of the writings of William A. Dembski.

Gustafson Takes on ID in New Mexico

Reformed theologian James M. Gustafson has long urged colleagues to take natural science into consideration in their theological arguments. But he views intelligent design theory not as science but as a surreptitious plot to allow religious interests into public schools.

A student of H. Richard Niebuhr, Gustafson became a leading figure in Protestant ethics and taught at Yale University, University of Chicago and Emory University before retiring to the Albuquerque suburb of Rio Rancho.

When contacted by *Vital Theology*, intelligent design was much on his mind because he had testified only three nights earlier against a policy that would permit teaching the evolution/intelligent design controversy in Rio Rancho schools.

The policy was adopted 3-2 after a hotly contested hearing. According to the *Albuquerque Journal*, passage was greeted by shouts of “Welcome to the Stone Age” by high school science teachers in the audience.

The school board member who proposed the measure is the pastor of a Pentecostal congregation. According to the *Journal*, he argued that the policy would promote critical thinking

skills that lead to “good science.”

But Gustafson was having none of it. “The irony to me is that the people who now want to introduce critical thinking into the sciences resolutely reject critical thinking about the Bible,” Gustafson told *Vital Theology*. “The idea of putting it in that way is a subterfuge for introducing religious interests into the public schools.

“I think one of the critical, practical issues is that intelligent design is not a biblical doctrine (and) it is not a Christian doctrine only,” Gustafson continued. “It is a natural theology. So what we have are people introducing intelligent design as a natural theology argument who reject natural theology on the basis of their views of Scripture.”

Gustafson, who is also an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, provided a transcript of his remarks to the board. Here are some excerpts from his statement:

“The context is not a modest proposal by two board members but a national movement. Proposals like this are being introduced nationwide only by Protestant conservative, evangelical, and fundamentalist Christians. The institutional and ideological base for this movement is the Discovery

Institute in Seattle, generously funded by ultraconservative Protestants and manned by evangelical and fundamentalist scholars.”

Further, he added “It is important to know the history of this movement in America now labeled intelligent design. For decades it was called *creation science*. Its purpose was honestly and forthrightly religious. The word *science* left an academic status. The word *creation* was dropped because it had biblical references. The term *intelligent design* was substituted. It was introduced to avoid using the word *God*. In the beginning, intelligent design created the heavens and the earth” ◀

James M. Gustafson's major work on ethics is the two-volume *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*. His most recent book is *An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt*.



James Gustafson

Science ...continued from page 3

weaknesses of contemporary biology, which is that the theory is far more deterministic than the phenomena that biologists study.

“When we look for purpose or design in nature, theologically, I think we need to look at the vision of the new creation and then work backwards.”

The understanding that God opens up a future and releases the grip of the past is really a way of saying that emergence of new traits and species is possible, he said.

Peters also sees a second theologically important way in which God gives the future. That is the biblical promise of new creation and resurrection, which is key to the new creation.

There are images in the Bible of the new order, he noted, in Isaiah 11 where the lion lies down with the lamb and in Revelation 21, where the New Jerusalem is described as a place where there will be no more crying or pain.

According to Peters, these images portray the creation that God called good in the book of Genesis.

By contrast, he said, the kind of creation that Charles Darwin described as waste—the predator/prey equation, survival of the fittest, extinction of species—are not the kinds of things that Christians would say is the world that God wants.

“When we look for purpose or design in nature, theologically, I think we need to look at the vision of the new creation and then work backwards,” said Peters.

“From our point of view, the ID position is extremely truncated,” said Peters. “It doesn't really represent what we think are God's redemptive purposes.” ◀

Padgett: Macro Design OK for Science

There's room for a concept of design in science, said Alan G. Padgett of Luther Seminary, but not at the level that intelligent design theorists suggest.

In lectures and in a forthcoming book, Padgett suggests that we distinguish between macro design and micro design.

"A monotheist is going to think the world is designed," he said. "So I want to limit that to a macro design for science."

Padgett believes the sciences are fully compatible with a macro design worldview in which God creates the world and establishes the laws of nature.

The sciences do not appeal to God as an explanation for anything, he said. They look to human beings as the explanation in the social sciences or to nature in the natural sciences. That formulation, he said, is both their limitation and their power.

"There's nothing incompatible with

a macro design view in biological evolution or any of the theories in the sciences," said Padgett. But scientists cannot start saying that God does not exist because that is not a scientific proposition.

Problems occur when ID advocates insist on a micro design approach in which they say that an intelligent being directly created a particular phenomenon, he said.

A better view, said Padgett, is that God created the universe as a whole system and any particular phenomenon that arises is a natural result of that system.

Concepts such as directly created DNA are bucking up against 500 years of natural science practice in which scientists limit their observations to empirical causes and do not look for supernatural causes.

"I think micro design is a problem if you're a working scientist," he said, "because it asks you to insert a new

kind of explanation into your inquiry, into your way of thinking about the world—the scientific way."

Physics, biology and chemistry do not examine miracles, he said. There can be no interventions.

But there's nothing wrong with that as scientific theory, said the theologian.

"The only people for whom this is a problem are people who think that science explains everything," said Padgett. "Once we get over that idea, it opens up a lot more domain for thinking about God in very rigorous and intelligent ways, which aren't necessarily on the paradigm of the sciences." ◀

The working title of Alan G. Padgett's forthcoming book is "The Laws of Nature and Nature's God: Macro Design as a Scientific Worldview." He is also the author of *Science and the Study of God: A Mutuality Model for Theology and Science*.

Scott Defines, Defends Methodological Materialism

Eugenie C. Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education, which defends the teaching of evolution, describes methodological materialism in the following excerpt found on the NCCE's Web site:

"Most scientists today require that science be carried out according to the rule of methodological materialism: to explain the natural world scientifically, scientists must restrict themselves only to material causes (to matter, energy, and their interaction). There is a practical reason for this restriction: it works. By continuing to seek natural explanations for how the world works, we have been able to find them. If supernatural explanations are allowed, they will discourage—or at least delay—the discovery of natural explanations, and we will understand less about the universe.

"There is also a logical reason for methodological materialism: the essence of science is the testing of alternate explanations against the natural world. To 'test' means to hold constant or control some factors. If omnipotent powers exist, by definition their effects cannot be held constant, or controlled. As a result, without making a judgment on the existence or nonexistence of God, modern scientists carry out their tests of hypotheses as if only natural causes were operating. It's a scientific analogue of Pascal's wager: if an omnipotent power such as God exists, then we can't control for its actions, so we're stuck with methodological materialism. If God doesn't exist, then of course methodological materialism is the best way to understand the natural world." ◀

Can Thomistic Natural Law Survive Evolution?

Villanova's Graham Views ID as Flawed Theology

Evolutionary science may not be a threat to God, but Villanova University theologian Mark Graham thinks it has dealt a fatal blow to Thomistic natural law theory.

Thomas Aquinas theorized that God instilled natural inclinations in each species—whether it be rabbits, monkeys or humans—that represent the ordering wisdom and God's purpose for that particular species.

A mainstay in Catholic theology for centuries, the natural law theory developed by the 13th century theologian and philosopher holds that:

- ◆ God guides and directs human beings to particular ends that are fitting for member of our species.
- ◆ when God creates humans, God exercises providence over the entire universe and directs things to their due ends;

“What we have with Darwinism and evolutionary theory is this encroaching naturalism or this ability to explain what used to be theological phenomena in a very naturalistic way.”

- ◆ the inclination for humans to pursue certain goods is the conduit through which God expresses God's wishes and intentions.

Graham uses a comparison of humans to rabbits to explain Thomistic natural law theory.

When a human being gets up in the morning, she or he is prompted by natural inclinations. Those lead to finding breakfast and then to pursuing various goods throughout the day. A rabbit may want breakfast, too, but it will pursue a different set of goods throughout the day. For St. Thomas, this was evidence of God's literally leading the different species to certain ends that had been preordained. God designated certain ends and goods for human beings to pursue that are distinct from rabbits.

But Darwinism or evolutionary theory poses a problem for Thomistic natural law theory because it provides a naturalistic explanation for how natural inclinations emerge over the course of history, said Graham.

Evolutionary biologists believe that processes such as natural selection are responsible for the natural inclinations in humans and in other species.

“What we have with Darwinism and evolutionary theory is this encroaching naturalism or this ability to explain what used to be theological phenomena in a very naturalistic way,” said Graham.

And intelligent design theory offers no hope of saving Thomistic natural law, he said.

Proponents of intelligent design might argue that God so finely tuned the conditions of the universe that the emergence of human beings was

preordained, said Graham.

But that kind of reasoning presupposes a deterministic universe in which things are entirely predictable, he said. While such ideas held sway until the 20th century, scientists have “completely demolished” that idea.

Most scientists today hold that the universe is composed of physical laws that provide uniformity and predictability, but that there also exists an intractable element of chance. Even at the smallest level, chance can have systemwide repercussions, if given enough time.

“I'm not going to make any claims about the scientific end of intelligent design,” said Graham, “but as a theological doctrine it fails because there is no way that God can have the foreknowledge necessary to set the initial

conditions such that human beings and the natural inclinations we now possess are the inevitable outcome of that.”

Darwinism and evolutionary theory “eviscerate the theological and normative moral import of the natural inclinations,” said Graham.

“Given Darwinism and evolutionary theory, we're not so sure whether God intended for us to have the natural inclinations we now possess,” he said. “I would even make the case that we can't be sure that God intended for human beings to emerge throughout the course of evolutionary history.”

The notion that God started changing the genetic makeup of creatures that predate human beings in order to form humans is statistically improbable, Graham argues.

The statistical probabilities that regulate genetic mutations are about 1 in 100,000 and the human body consists of about 20,000 to 25,000 genes, he said.

“If God is going to start tinkering with the genes to get human beings, it is going to take a heck of a long time to do that,” he said. “Even if God is going to intervene, God is going to need a lot of time not to violate the physical laws that God laid down and the statistical probabilities consistent with those physical laws.”

What makes this scenario even more improbable, he said, is that humans are embedded in a number of contexts—environmental, social and others—that bear upon their adaptability and their ability to survive.

The concept of God meddling in natural affairs over a period of billions of years is “very inconsistent with what we know about divine activities,” he said.



Mark Graham

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The ID Case

Intelligent design theorists have a vastly different view.

William A. Dembski, one of the intellectual leaders of the ID movement, said intelligent design has theological implications but it is first and foremost a scientific theory.

The major question raised by intelligent design is whether there are patterns in nature that are best explained as the result of purely material

“That’s just like pouring gasoline on fire. No wonder ID has been able to garner so much support.”

processes—as most scientists maintain—or whether they are best explained as the result of intelligence.

“I think that’s the fundamental question which drives this matter and I would say that’s a scientific question,” Dembski told *Vital Theology*.

Dembski, who holds doctorates in mathematics and philosophy, disavows any connection between ID and scientific creationism, which posits that the earth is only 6,000-10,000 years old. Scientific creationism generally supports a literal interpretation of the creation stories found in Genesis.

Padgett estimates that about half of natural scientists believe in a God, but said the other 50 percent are not necessarily atheists. Many are agnostic and just don’t think about such questions.

Only a small minority of scientists—Padgett puts it at 15 percent—believe that biological evolution has demonstrated that there is no God.

The no-God view has been trumpeted by some high-profile scientists, such as the late astronomer and television personality Carl Sagan and by Richard Dawkins, who is a zoologist and outspoken atheist.

“But I don’t think the majority of biologists get excited about that,” said Padgett. “They probably don’t even think about it.”

Scientific Method

At the heart of the conflict is “methodological materialism,” the idea that scientists should restrict their inquiries to questions involving matter, energy and their interaction.

Intelligent design theorists argue that methodological materialism is deficient as a scientific method

because it fails to account for the extraordinary complexity found in nature, a complexity that they theorize could only be produced as a result of intelligence.

None of the theologians interviewed by *Vital Theology* are troubled by methodological materialism when used as a scientific method.

Many object, however, when methodological materialism is positioned as the only understanding of reality in the universe. Such a view does not allow for the existence of the divine.

Ted Peters, professor of systematic theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union, both in Berkeley, Calif., has spent years encouraging dialogue between scientists and theologians at the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS).

“What’s important is that we go into that with both scientists and theologians having their own integrity and seeing if a third synthesis can emerge,” said Peters. “We don’t start with an ideology that says it has to be this way.”

Instead, said Peters, who is co-editor

of *Theology and Science* journal, there is a need for two languages—religious and scientific—and science needs to maintain its autonomy.

But, according to Peters, some scientists and some proponents of ID theory have done their best to confuse the public.

Some of evolution’s strongest defenders, such as the late Stephen J. Gould and Eugenie Scott, have tried to paint ID as a religious position masquerading in scientific guise. Then they put up signs around the scientific establishment that say: “Keep Religion Out.”

“That’s just like pouring gasoline on fire,” said Peters. “No wonder ID has been able to garner so much support. I think that was a big mistake.”

Scientists go too far when they turn science into ideology, he said, trying either to prove the existence or the non-existence of God.

“We don’t want a sneaky, secular, naturalist, atheist, materialist ideology to ride in on the scientific horse,” said Peters. “So the Thomas Huxleys of the Darwinian period or the Richard Dawkinses or Ian Wilsons of our own period ought not be considered science, ought not be taught in schools because they represent an ideology. They don’t represent research science.”

Huxley was an early defender of Darwin. Quite the opposite of the atheistic Dawkins, Wilson, who was educated at Oxford, has attempted to establish the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin through scientific methods, an effort derided by scientists and religious scholars alike.

Religious people have a right to say they don’t want taxpayer money to support a materialist ideology, said Peters.

But, according to Peters, ID proponents such as Philip Johnson have been all too willing to conflate the narrowly held materialist view of the universe that Peters differentiates from

Key Arguments in ID/Evolution Debate

research science.

“There’s a subtlety in there that I think is very important but that gets lost in the ID strategy” of promoting the evolution/ID controversy, said Peters.

A Complex God

One glaring obstacle to bridging the gap between science and theology is the way in which many scientists conceive of God.

The God that zoologist Dawkins rejects is a very simple concept that only narrowly resembles the fully formed God whom Christians worship, said Padgett.

Most scientists who want to resist religion think of God only on a super-natural level.

When CTNS Director Bob Russell presents a non-interventionist, objective understanding of God’s activity in the world, the average scientist is dumbfounded, said Peters, because their only image is of a miracle-working God, not of a God who works constantly through natural processes.

“What I like to say is, ‘Good try, Creationism. Good try, ID. But with this criterion of what constitutes good science, you don’t make it.’”

On the other hand, even the best-known defenders of God in the scientific community articulate their understanding of the divine at no better than a 12th grade confirmation level, according to Peters.

What Schools Teach

Intelligent design proponents received a boost in the court of public opinion last summer when President George W. Bush endorsed the idea of teaching the evolution/ID controversy in public schools.

But ID proponents are overplaying their hand when they insist that it be

The international discussion of intelligent design is multifaceted. Here are the key arguments—often in conflict with each other—that can be found in this issue of *Vital Theology*.

- ◆ Christians need to affirm both science and faith and to understand the differences between them.
- ◆ Natural science does not tell us who God is.
- ◆ Intelligent design is a matter of theology, not natural science.
- ◆ Intelligent design is a scientific theory with theological implications.
- ◆ Scientists go too far when they turn science into ideology.
- ◆ Students need to learn good science.
- ◆ Intelligent design and creationism are not the same.
- ◆ Intelligent design is creationism in new clothing.
- ◆ Intelligent design is similar to deism.
- ◆ Intelligent design can appeal to many religions.
- ◆ Intelligent design is bad theology.
- ◆ Only conservative Christians are promoting intelligent design.
- ◆ Intelligent design destroys the atheism of Darwinian evolution.
- ◆ Evolutionary theory does not imply atheism.
- ◆ Science is not about investigating primary causes.
- ◆ God’s action is invisible to science.
- ◆ Methodological materialism is the proper limitation for scientific inquiry.
- ◆ Methodological materialism is too limiting for scientific inquiry.

taught, Padgett maintained.

Students need to learn well-tested theories that best represent the truth, he said. That means schools should

not teach cold fusion, the existence of alien intelligence on other planets or intelligent design, because there is no credible scientific evidence for any of these ideas.

Peters said it is wrong to cast the current squabbles over school curricula as faith vs. science. ID proponents are trying to propose an alternative to currently accepted scientific theory, he said. Both sides hold a high opinion of science.

But if the battlefield is science, intelligent design is losing on many fronts.

“My criterion for a good science is one that has a fertile research program,”

said Peters. “If you work within the theory and engage in research, you’re going to produce new knowledge. Darwinian and neo-Darwinian models of evolution produce new knowledge. Not only do they tell us about the history of the planet, but in the field of biology they actually lead to discoveries about biological processes that lead to medical therapy. So it’s indispensable for biologists who are doing medical research.”

Neither scientific creationism nor intelligent design can come up with a research program with that level of fertility, argues Peters.

“What I like to say is, ‘Good try, Creationism. Good try, ID. But with this criterion of what constitutes good science, you don’t make it.’”

That leads him to somewhat cautiously support the need to teach the Darwinian model. But it also leaves open the possibility that evolution will someday be replaced by a better theory. ◀

Natural Law ...continued from page 9

Graham, a lay Catholic whose work focuses on moral theology, said he can see no way to rehabilitate the credibility of Thomistic natural law.

Science is inherently revisable and scientific theories turn out to be wrong in the end, although that sometimes takes centuries to occur, he acknowledged.

But when there is a basic agreement in the scientific community that something is correct, it is not the place of theologians to dispute that, said Graham. On the contrary, theologians should learn from science.

"Theologians need to wake up and start reckoning with the fact that scientists are saying things that are very applicable to generating theology, especially moral theology," said the Villanova professor.

Science is simply applying human reason to reality, said Graham, and that can provide some glimpse of reality. Because all of creation

manifests God in some way, it behooves theologians to consider the findings of science.

In the end, however, science and theology have different ways of operating. Science insists that things be verified by certain types of tests and theology does not.

"Even if theology can't be tested and duplicated in a laboratory that doesn't mean that it's not true," said Graham. "Theology is always going to be going beyond science." ◀

An article by Mark Graham about the challenges that evolution poses to Thomistic natural theology is under consideration for publication by a scholarly journal. Meanwhile, he recommends these books for lay people: Kenneth Miller, *Finding Darwin's God*; Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age and Paths from Science towards God*; and Keith Ward, *God, Chance, and Necessity*.

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