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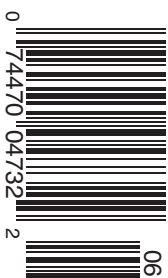
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Intelligent Design is an interesting variation on an old argument, but ultimately a disappointing attempt to discredit science – one that does a disservice to people of faith, argues the Reverend Dr David Millikan.

ILLUSTRATION Justin Randall

BAD FAITH

AS A CLERGYMAN ordained in the Uniting Church, you might think I would welcome a call to teach “Intelligent Design” theory in schools, since it presupposes a guiding hand in the creation of the universe. We clergy certainly need all the help we can get! But Intelligent Design (I.D.) is both bad theology and bad science. Let me explain.

Brendan Nelson, Australia’s Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, previously argued that schools ought to be allowed to teach I.D., later clarifying that it should be taught as part of philosophy or religion classes. U.S. President George W. Bush agrees with him, and so does Tim Hawkes, headmaster of Australia’s oldest private school, The King’s School in Sydney.

What is it that is so threatening about this suggestion that scientists and science teachers are up in arms? There is a beguiling simplicity about what I.D. is saying. It goes like this: the Earth is full of living things displaying complexity and order so remarkable that it makes more sense to say it was made by an intelligent creator than to say it is the result of the impersonal forces of natural selection.

I.D. has emerged in the past 15 years as something of an intellectual juggernaut. It is at its most powerful in the U.S., where institutes and impressive websites are devoted to its advocacy. But I.D. has been around in different forms since Plato and Aristotle. Its introduction and most famous argument came from English theologian William Paley, the bookish Archbishop of Carlisle. In his *Natural Theology* in 1802, it took the form of the ‘watchmaker argument’. He put it like this: if you stumbled on a watch, having never seen one before, what would you think? Here was something quite different from the world around you. Its mechanism would seem wonderfully intricate and ordered. If someone asked you: “Where did that come from?”, you would be obliged to say: “Some clever person has made this”.

This is what the supporters of I.D. are saying. Look at a single living cell and be astonished at its complexity: this surely cannot be explained by the

crudities of evolutionary theory? Such order must be the product of mind, they argue, rather than chance operating on an enormous time scale.

So why are 70,000 Australian teachers and scientists so angry about the introduction of this argument into schools that they have written an open letter to major newspapers? Why has the Dover School Board of Education in Pennsylvania been obliged to defend itself in the United States district courts for teaching I.D.? And why are so many of those who stand opposed to Intelligent Design theory, including me, believers in God?

“Basing an argument for the existence of God on gaps in our scientific knowledge leads to the progressive marginalisation of God, as well as the retreat of religion from the intellectual field.”

The I.D. idea has two main problems, the first being the internal inconsistency of its argument, the other is related to the way in which its advocates are using their hypothesis to mount an attack against contemporary scientific theory.

I.D. is susceptible to the ‘God of the gaps’ criticism. Before the work of Newton and Galileo, many Christians believed the planets were pushed

around the heavens by angels. In still earlier times, an eclipse of the Sun was thought such an aberration, whole civilisations were convinced it could only come about as an act of God. And in New Testament times, many people believed epilepsy was caused by evil spirits.

But as science came to understand the actual physical mechanisms behind these and other phenomena, supernatural explanations were abandoned.

So basing an argument for the existence of God on gaps in our scientific knowledge leads to the progressive marginalisation of God, as well as the retreat of religion from the intellectual field.

I.D. is arguing that the world is so inexplicably complex that it defies contemporary understanding. But that proves nothing. It simply argues that at the moment we don’t know. It is dangerous to use God to fill the gaps because when the gaps are eventually filled by science, God is chased out.

If I.D. has this vulnerability, why don’t scientists just continue to go about their business and, in time, I.D. will be overtaken by the increase in human knowledge; which, after all, is what science is about. Right? No, the scientists who oppose I.D. see a darker purpose at work: they believe I.D. is an attack on science itself. And I’m inclined to agree.

The advocacy of I.D. is not as innocent as it seems. It’s the latest battle in the war against the ‘evils of Darwinism’, one that has been fought ferociously in the U.S. for more than a century. There, evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity have never truly forgotten – and certainly never forgiven – the way they were humiliated by the theory of evolution. Having failed to dismantle it, they’re spruiking I.D. in an attempt to destabilise it.

Polls indicate that 47 per cent of Americans accept the literal account of creation in the book of Genesis. Bush holds this view too. For Christians of this hue, I.D. is just the latest offensive weapon. ❌

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