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Leave science questions to science

Meditations on the spiritual life

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As a Mormon, I definitely believe that our world was created by an intelligent designer. Indeed, it seems to me that an open-minded philosophy of this sort is entirely consistent with modern scientific knowledge. But I find that on almost all specific issues, I disagree with the “intelligent design” (ID) movement, and I do not believe this material has any place in public schools. For starters, although the ID movement takes some pains to distinguish itself from the traditional creationist community, it suffers from some of the same fundamental problems.

For example, some creationists have argued that God created the world (or the universe as a whole) with an extensive system of fossils, geologic layers and adjusted isotopic composition of rocks, all giving the world an “appearance of age,” perhaps as a test of our faith. As Catholic biologist Kenneth Miller has written, “In order to defend God against the challenge [creationists] see from evolution, they have to make him into a schemer, a trickster, even a charlatan. Their version of God is one who intentionally plants misleading clues beneath our feet and in the heavens themselves.”

ID scholars are more generally careful here. But Philip Johnson, a senior figure in the movement, has nevertheless argued that certain aspects of our physical world are “mysterious,” not subject to human investigation or understanding. This to me still suggests a form of deception, and is inimical to the spirit of scientific inquiry.

There are also numerous technical difficulties with the ID literature, similar to difficulties in creationist literature. For example, both creationist Duane Gish and ID scholar Michael Behe have asserted that paleontologists would never discover transitional fossils linking land mammals to marine mammals. Yet three intermediate fossil species have recently been discovered, with exactly the expected combination of terrestrial and aquatic features.

ID scholars, like their creationist predecessors, have invoked probability theory. But as far as I can see, these arguments all suffer from the fallacy of supposing that if some physical system is improbable, it must be the result of intelligent design. Each individual snowflake is a very improbable structure. Yet no one claims that they are supernaturally created.

All of these difficulties result from attempts to read the Bible as a scientific document, which it was never even intended to be. Indeed, the ID movement derives mostly from the evangelical world. Major Christian denominations found their peace with science years ago.

Even the LDS Church long ago decided that there is no point in science vs. religion battles. In a 1931 letter, the LDS First Presidency declared, "Leave geology, biology, archaeology and anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, to scientific research." This statement is now part of a church-approved packet used at BYU to inform students on these issues.

Nonetheless, there are vestiges of creationist-style material in LDS publications, left over from an earlier era when some thought there was value in such material. For example, the current Old Testament Institute manual, in its lesson on the creation, takes a position against evolution, and includes a lengthy quote from a Seventh-day Adventist creationist. Hopefully this will be updated in an upcoming edition.

Religion together with science can add immeasurably to our world. Both can stand in awe and wonder and the majesty of the universe, which is now known to be much larger and more exotic than we ever before imagined. But the overall lesson is clear: Leave questions of science to science. Bringing sectarian religion into scientific controversies only sows confusion and strife.

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