

Nature's God: The crucial point for Christians

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The notion of intelligent design in nature is not controversial among Christians. “The heavens proclaim the glory of God,” the psalmist exclaims, and worshipers regularly confess their belief in God “the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” St. Augustine believed that he saw “vestiges of the Trinity” in the created order—in the way love is always a threefold reality (involving the lover, the beloved and the love between them). Ask Christians where they most vividly experience God and the answer will often be a variant of “nature.” Most Christians know what Schleiermacher meant when he spoke about the natural attitude of “reverence before the All.”

What is controversial is the scientific teaching of intelligent design, a subject explored both sympathetically and critically by J. Scott Turner in this issue. Proponents of ID claim that Darwin’s theory of evolution cannot explain natural phenomena that exhibit “irreducible complexity.” They argue that the hypothesis of an “intelligent designer” best fits the evidence.

It is the placement of this teaching in science classrooms that most worries ID’s opponents, both inside and outside the church. Some politicians have called for “teaching the controversy” between Darwin and ID, and some local school boards have mandated doing this. But courts have struck down the mandatory teaching of ID, judging that ID is based on religion and that mandatory instruction therefore violates the First Amendment.

ID may be linked to religious beliefs, but the designer envisioned in ID theory is not the Christian God or even necessarily a single deity. Proponents of intelligent design are not talking about the triune God, signs of whom Augustine sought in creation, nor are they talking about the God who became incarnate, born of Mary. It is a vague sort of *deus ex machina* who comes in to fill the holes in Darwinian theory. ID’s “God of the gaps” approach has often floundered when the gaps are filled by

scientific advances. This approach leads to wretched science, and its impact on theology is even worse.

Whether ID can ever be a scientific program remains doubtful, though as Turner points out, the concepts of design and purpose cannot be entirely excluded from scientific study, even by Darwinians. It is difficult to speak of nature at all without some attention to words with theological freight, like *design*, *beauty* and *order*. Scientists often praise theories for their “elegance”—such theories explain phenomena not only truly, but beautifully. And clearly “reverence before the All” is often evoked in observation of the cosmos, or of microorganisms, or even of chemical reactions. Students may raise questions that verge on the religious, and science teachers may be drawn to answer them, without any laws being broken.

The danger would come with making those questions mandatory through writing them into curricula. Many people, not just religious believers, would object to placing teachers in the role of religious instructors. The crucial point for Christians is that the Christian discussion of creation ultimately takes place within an article of faith. “I believe,” the first words of the Apostles’ Creed, put its affirmations in the realm of faith, not biology.