Creator God: The debate on intelligent design

by David C. Steinmetz in the December 27, 2005 issue

Intelligent design is the theory that the universe is too complex a place to be accounted for by an appeal to natural selection and the random processes of evolution. Some kind of overarching intellect must have been at work in the design of the natural order.

In principle, intelligent design is religion-neutral. The intelligent designer is not named and no claim is made that the designer is the Christian God. But in fact, intelligent design is mainly advocated in America by conservative Christians, who regard the account of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis as a scientific description of the origin of the world.

When the members of the school board of Dover, Pennsylvania, a small community near Harrisburg, required students to read a short statement concerning intelligent design before studying ninth-grade biology, they met stiff resistance from some parents and teachers. The result was a court case in Harrisburg that will be adjudicated in January.

It is easy to understand why intelligent design appeals to conservative Christians. As long as all Christians, conservative and liberal alike, confess that their God is the “Maker of heaven and earth” and the “Creator of all things, visible and invisible,” they are on record as supporters of what looks for all the world like intelligent design. Christians have always brushed aside the notion that the world is self-generating, a random concatenation of miscellaneous atoms accidentally thrown together by no one in particular and serving no larger purpose than their own survival. The first article of the Christian creed could not be clearer: the world exists by the will of God. No intelligent designer, no world.

What less conservative Christians are not committed to is the idea that intelligent design excludes the possibility of evolution. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has informally taken the position that evolution is one of the tools God used

in the creation of the world. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn has even argued that a scientist who uses evolution as the grounds for atheism is speaking as an amateur theologian, not as a professional scientist. Science has no answer to the question of whether there is a God.

Nonfundamentalists are similarly skeptical of the idea that the biblical story of creation is a scientific account that should be read as literally as possible. As long ago as the third century the great biblical scholar Origen raised substantial doubts about whether a literal reading of the story made good theological sense. In his view, readers should distinguish between stories that are both true and factual (like the story of the crucifixion of Jesus) and those that are true but not factual (like the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son).

Was there actually a good Samaritan who helped a Jew wounded by thieves, or a prodigal son who wasted his father's substance in riotous living? Who knows, and even more important, who ultimately cares? The power of the stories is independent of the question of whether they actually happened in space and time.

The same is true for the account of creation. Origen could not believe that light and darkness existed before there were sun, moon and stars. Or that the invisible and transcendent God took a daily stroll in the Garden of Eden to enjoy the evening breezes, like a squire surveying his estates. Or that the Maker of heaven and earth could not locate Adam and Eve when they hid from him, and had to ask them to show themselves.

These "absurdities" (as Origen labeled them) were unsubtle hints from God that he wanted the account of creation read in an altogether different way, not as history but as truth "in the semblance of history." Truth embedded in "the semblance of history" is truth conveyed through fiction. But truth conveyed through fiction is still God's truth. No one has an excuse not to pay attention to it.

Origen was aware that it is possible to devote oneself to the study of the world and not conclude that it was made by God. Aristotle thought that the world was eternal and had no beginning, while the Gnostics thought it was the result of an unplanned and unfortunate accident. Moreover, there are random cruelties in nature—tornadoes, hurricanes, tidal waves, disease—that seem easier to bear if no good God is posited.

For Origen, the truth embedded in the “semblance of history” is the teaching that God is the ultimate source of everything that exists. The details of how creation happened were unclear to him (though he had some ideas), but the fact that it occurred seemed to him beyond any doubt. Belief in a Creator was therefore for Origen a conclusion of faith grounded in a proper reading of scripture. It was intelligible, even rationally persuasive to believers, but did not rest on reason alone.

Of course, there have always been readers of the Bible—then as now—who miss even the broadest hints and insist on reading the creation story as straightforward history. Reading literally a text that God intended to be read nonliterally was regarded by Origen as a mark of spiritual immaturity, the consequences of which are never good.

Even if one were to set aside an overly literal reading of the creation story and reject the assumption that intelligent design and evolution are always mutually exclusive, other questions would remain. Can an intelligent designer be known from the intelligent design of the world? And if so, to what extent and by whom? Or, to put it somewhat differently, is knowledge of an intelligent designer public knowledge, equally accessible to all?

St. Thomas Aquinas thought that some things could be known by philosophers about God on the basis of reason alone. Rational reflection on the world could lead intelligent people with no religious commitments to the conclusion that there is a First Cause or Unmoved Mover responsible for the existence of this world and its progress toward its own natural ends. One could even call this First Cause God. What one could not do on the basis of reason alone was conclude that the First Cause had created the world from nothing or redeemed it through Jesus Christ.

Thomas suggested that whatever philosophers learned about God from a study of the world was always fragmentary and mixed with errors. Even a lifetime study of the honey bee, one of God’s smaller creatures, left philosophers with as many questions as answers. How much less could unaided human reason learn from nature about nature’s God! Which is why Thomas argued for a supernatural self-revelation of God that corrected reason’s errors and gave it a more complete and intellectually satisfying account of the world as God’s creation.

John Calvin went further than Thomas by arguing that human reason has been damaged by sin. It is not merely reason’s limitations that have to be overcome (as

Thomas had argued), but reason's inescapable disorientation. Something has gone fundamentally wrong with the noetic machinery of the human mind.

In order to understand Calvin's argument, it may be useful to distinguish three terms: a) the natural knowledge of God, b) natural theology and c) a theology of nature. Calvin asked whether human beings have a natural knowledge of God (his answer was yes); whether they can arrange what they know from nature into an intelligible pattern known as natural theology (his answer was no); and whether redeemed—and only redeemed—human beings can construct a legitimate theology of nature by reclaiming nature as a useful source of the true knowledge of God (his answer was yes).

Part of Calvin's argument sounds like the current argument for intelligent design. God is a great craftsman (*opifex*) who has left the marks of his craft on the world (*opificium*). While the world is never part of God (as pantheists mistakenly assume) and God remains transcendent at every point of contact with the universe, the world is nevertheless the theater of God's glory. When the psalmist wrote that "the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows forth God's handiwork," he was describing a ceaseless activity that has never diminished, much less been terminated. Marks of God's glory—or, if you prefer, marks of God's intelligent design—are everywhere.

To which Calvin adds an idea from Cicero's *De natura deorum*. All human beings have what Cicero called a *sensus divinitatis*, an unshakable intuitive knowledge that there is a God, a feeling that back of the mystery of the being of the world lies the even greater mystery of the being of God. No one knows intuitively who this God may be or what this God may be like. But everyone knows intuitively that this God exists.

The dramatic proof for Calvin that Cicero was right is the fact that even human beings who are not particularly religious turn instinctively to this unknown God in moments of crisis. Flood, pestilence and war can drive otherwise irreligious men and women to prayer. This phenomenon of "foxhole religion" can be summarized in the old ditty, "And bos'n Bill was an atheist still, except sometimes in the dark."

Less dramatic proof for Calvin lay in the spread of world religions. Wherever human beings are found, there also can be found some form of religion. Calvin did not think that all human beings instinctively worshiped the true God. But in his view even the

worship of lesser gods is valid evidence of a universal “sense of divinity.”

All of which left Calvin with a difficult question. If the marks of God’s intelligent design are ubiquitous and if human beings know intuitively that God exists, why are they so unresponsive to the world as the theater of God’s glory?

The question brought Calvin back to St. Augustine’s account of original sin. The doctrine of original sin is not the teaching that human beings have problems (though all human beings do). Original sin is the teaching that human beings are themselves the problem. Something has gone wrong with the human race at a level too deep for therapy. Did this so-called original sin have noetic consequences? Did it affect human knowing?

Theologians in Calvin’s day who thought it did tended to argue that such impairment affected the use of what is known rather than the faculty of knowing itself. Human beings could undoubtedly learn some truths about God from a study of nature. But as sinners they were sure to misuse what they knew.

Calvin was dissatisfied with this explanation. He was convinced that sin showed itself not only in the misuse of what is known but in the faculty of knowing itself. Human knowing had been skewed by human sin, though human beings had not been blinded by sin. Blindness might have reduced human culpability for chronic misconduct. Something lesser, but no less dangerous, was at work.

Calvin used three images to describe what he had in mind. The first image compared what fallen human beings can learn about God from nature to the scattered sparks that dot the ground around a dying campfire. The sparks give neither heat nor light unless they are raked together. So, too, the sparklike moments of discernment of which fallen humanity is capable kindle neither affection nor insight unless they are drawn together into an intelligible pattern.

The second image presupposes the darkness of a lonely countryside as a storm is brewing. The moon and the stars are covered by thick clouds, and the only light available to the traveler crossing a meadow is provided by sudden flashes of lightning. Momentary flashes of light are better than no light at all, but they serve more as a warning of the traveler’s predicament than as a useful guide out of it.

The third image is probably the most effective. Calvin compared sinners to an old man whose eyesight has been dimmed by age. To be sure, the old man can see a

book that is handed to him, but he cannot read it. He can read it only if he is given his spectacles. So, too, fallen human beings cannot read the book of nature and learn about God without the assistance of the spectacles of scripture. The self-revelation of God in nature is barely visible to eyes blurred by sin.

Fallen human beings see scattered sparks of truth, momentary flashes of illumination, and blurred pages from the book of nature. When sinners try to construct out of these fragments a natural theology that points to the true God, they succeed only in assembling a picture of what Calvin called an idol, a deity who is not really God but only a cheap substitute for the real thing.

Nevertheless, Calvin remained optimistic about the recovery of nature as a reliable source of the knowledge of God for believers. In his view nature was only too willing to reveal its theological secrets to minds renewed by the Holy Spirit and eyes corrected by the spectacles of scripture. But there was for Calvin no public access to the knowledge of God through nature, absent the presence of grace.

“No public access to the knowledge of God through nature” brings us back to the current argument over intelligent design. Some issues in the debate are so modern that older Christian tradition has no wisdom to offer. Calvin never heard of Darwin, though he did know Lucretius and the Epicureans and would not have been entirely astonished by the arguments of some Darwinians. One can only say that he believed the development of nature was never random or outside the control of God.

Origen, however, is part of the debate, for he warns against reading the creation account in Genesis as a scientific description of the world’s beginnings. Not all advocates of intelligent design read the Bible this way, but some clearly do. Origen’s suggestion that the creation story is true the way the parables are true, but not true the way the facts about the Norman invasion of England are true, seems eerily relevant. Genesis answers the question of why the world exists, but not of how it came to be.

The debate moves to familiar ground when advocates of intelligent design argue that one can proceed from an observation of what appear to be elements of design in nature to the affirmation of the existence of an intelligent designer. Advocates of this position claim that their argument is religiously neutral and does not violate the nonestablishment clause of the U.S. Constitution. After all, their argument for intelligent design does not identify the intelligent designer as the God of any

particular religion. As they see it, their argument is a conclusion of reason alone based on empirical observation.

But the advocates of intelligent design cannot escape theology so easily. Whether they like it or not, what they have offered is a form of natural theology. Leaving God unnamed does not make their argument any less theological, especially when they claim that the elements of complex design they have observed in nature are present because of the activity of their unnamed intelligent designer.

Thomas Aquinas accepted a similar claim that reason unaided by faith could move from a consideration of causes and effects in nature to a consideration of the existence of an unnamed First Cause or Unmoved Mover. But Thomas knew that talk about “First Causes” and “Unmoved Movers” was nevertheless talk about God and belonged to natural theology. Natural theology was for him theology grounded in reason alone.

Calvin rejected out of hand the possibility (which Thomas allowed) of a valid natural theology. On his principles, advocates of intelligent design have reversed the proper order of knowing. People do not believe in an intelligent designer because they observe in nature the marks of intelligent design. Indeed, the opposite is true. People find intelligent design in the natural order because they believe on other grounds in the existence of an intelligent designer.

On the one hand, Thomas offers an approach to intelligent design that leaves an opening for intellectuals like the columnist Charles Krauthammer, who admits he believes in some kind of intelligent design, but finds himself unable to identify the intelligent designer with any of the gods currently on offer. He is also firmly convinced that intelligent design should not be confused with natural science.

On the other hand, Calvin offers what is probably a better account of the role actually played by intelligent design among its advocates. Advocates of intelligent design claim that anyone can be led to belief in an intelligent designer by a scientific study of nature. But that is unlikely to have been the path they themselves followed. As Christians, they assumed the existence of an intelligent designer and read the evidence drawn from the natural order through the spectacles of their Christian faith. The results were not hard to predict.

Inadequate theology should not be allowed to discourage better. The good news is that mainline churches are not going to join the fundamentalist jihad against

evolution. But that does not mean they can be indifferent to the doctrine of creation.

The world is, as Calvin argued, the theater of God’s glory. The heavens do declare the glory of God and the firmament does show forth God’s handiwork. Christians have no excuse not to celebrate that fact—the more intelligently, the better.