

‘Intelligent’ Design? Relax, God is Stranger still (Fr. John Garvey)

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There has been some debate, even at local school-board levels, about the theory of evolution vs. creationism and the more recently offered idea of “intelligent design.” Now Cardinal Cristoph Schönborn has weighed in with an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* (July 7), claiming that Christians cannot believe that life’s origins can be found in natural selection’s chancy, random stabs at development. Some kind of intelligent design must lie behind it, and reason can lead to a rational belief in an intelligent designer. This has been seized on as a retreat from John Paul II’s endorsement of the theory of evolution as real science, a sign that the new papacy will retreat from serious science into the intelligent design camp. (It may only show that Cardinal Schönborn is not as sophisticated in his understanding of contemporary philosophy and science as John Paul II was.)

Apart from the fact that a cardinal’s somewhat casual comments hardly constitute a major shift in church policy, it isn’t as if Catholics had accepted the theory of evolution only during the last pontificate. I went to Catholic schools from grade school through college, beginning years before Vatican II, and my graduate school was an Orthodox seminary.



The Creation of birds and fish

In this sense my education has been thoroughly nonsecular. Never from kindergarten on did I hear evolution questioned; it was what we were taught. There are extreme believers in Darwinian evolution who are convinced that the apparent randomness of the process is a serious challenge to believers. They remind me of an atheist who tried to convert me to his view with Jacques Monod's interesting book, *Chance and Necessity*. The argument that the randomness of the universe seen at the subatomic level, or the randomness of natural selection, is a challenge to a belief in God is curious. As I told my atheist friend, it is a mistake to equate randomness with meaninglessness. Darwin himself was troubled by the apparent cruelty and heartlessness of the process, and this led him, as it has led others, to reject the idea of a beneficent God.

The problem with the God rejected by Darwinian atheists and the God of those who believe in intelligent design is that neither is particularly biblical. (By the way, I think it is fair of those who believe in intelligent design to complain that they are not, as some allege, a wedge into the schools that will lead eventually to teaching biblical literalism. This is not, in fact, part of their argument, and the intelligent designer they posit has little to do with the God of the Bible.) The intelligent designer seen by both camps—rejected by one, accepted by the other—is essentially the God of the deists, a generally benign designer compelled to create the best of all possible worlds, a world in which profound flaws and seemingly mad design would be unthinkable.

If intelligent design were science, if it could be supported by fact and not what amounts to aesthetic speculation, it might be a good argument for a Gnostic demiurge, a deranged creator-god. Yes, the intricacy of the eye and the elegance of flagella are amazing and the details beautiful. But a designer with his, her, or its hand in at this clockwork level could surely do something to prevent anencephalic

babies or Alzheimer's disease. What about all the apparently useless parts of the DNA strand? Couldn't praying mantises have been designed with a way to mate that didn't require the female to devour the head of the male during intercourse? I've seen a mother hamster devouring her young with blank eyes, preferable to grief, I guess, under the circumstances. The designer's eye is upon the sparrow, the mantis, the mother hamster eating her young, the brainless baby. Arguments at this level are more philosophical than scientific.

The philosophical argument seems to be based on a kind of aesthetics—an aesthetic sense based in scientific observation, to be sure, but a little like this argument: Could blind chance produce something as beautiful as so many celestial phenomena are, or the Irish coast, or a sunset? I think not, but that's not a scientific argument. A believing scientist will certainly delight in whatever beautiful thing is found under a microscope or deep in the cosmos, just as a believer thanks God for the music of Bach, and will see something of God's glory there. But to say "this is so irreducibly complex and intricate that it must have been designed" does nothing to advance science, which still must connect the dots and describe in detail, and will not be helped by a designer-hypothesis that can be neither proved nor falsified. To say "this must have been designed" will always, at most, be a kind of chorus. You've heard of voodoo economics? This is karaoke science.

The God of the Bible is responsible for the world, but it is a world that has been wounded beyond comprehension by sin and evil. The whole of creation, Paul insists in the eighth chapter of Romans, groans as it waits for its true completion in God. When we study this creation we study something infinitely more mysterious—and torn and unfinished—than a well-designed machine; it is something at once wonderful and perishing and cannot be reduced to what science can see and tell us, either about randomness or design. The God of the Bible is not the prime mover of Greek philosophy or the benign provider of the deists. He appears in the burning bush and will not give his name. He wrestles with Jacob (who is Israel, the one who "contends with God"). This God has no handle—not designer, planner, nor architect, except as a fleeting metaphor. This God is unknowable, silent, suddenly appearing, interfering when unwanted and absent when wanted, always elusive—and this tricky one is responsible for the universe. In Jesus Christ we are invited to call this God our Father, a father whose son was crucified to begin the release of the universe from the bondage Paul tells us about, inviting us to await a goodness that is only dawning, and certainly can't be seen clearly under a microscope.

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