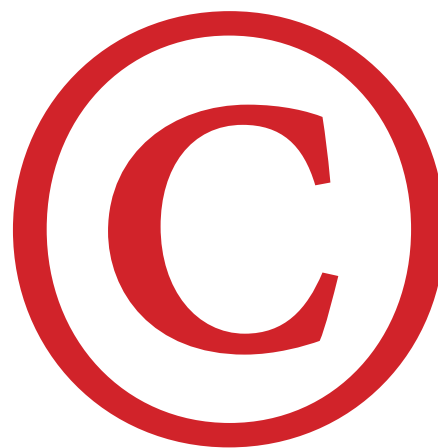


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Intelligent design is good topic for religion, not biology, class

By David R. Keller
Salt Lake Tribune

As expected, the "intelligent design" controversy has come to Utah, with proponents arguing that the hypothesis should be taught side-by-side with biological evolution in public school (Salt Lake Tribune, June 3, A1, A5).

Intelligent design theory is nothing new. Two hundred years ago, English Archdeacon William Paley argued that we correctly attribute the design and construction of watches, which exhibit the systematic arrangement of parts, to watchmakers. By analogy, according to Paley, living beings, which also exhibit the systematic arrangement of parts, must also be attributable to a maker, or God.

Certainly, due to its importance in the history of the Western tradition, intelligent design theory is worthy of study. For example, it is noteworthy that Charles Darwin fully accepted Paley's account until his expedition on the HMS Beagle.

But the agenda by certain political leaders to insert intelligent design into the biology curriculum, and present it as a plausible alternative to evolution, is seriously mistaken.

Combined with modern genetics, evolution by natural selection offers a consistent, coherent and empirically verifiable account of the genesis, structure and function of all organisms. As the unifying paradigm of life science, evolution is scientific law.

It is easy to see why evolution is so threatening. Contrary to the notion that humans represent the pinnacle of life on earth and are in some way manifestations of divine intentionality, evolutionary law demonstrates that humans are simply one type of a panoply of life forms, all sharing the same genetic material and arising from one common ancestor. As such, like all species, eventually Homo sapiens is destined to become extinct, possibly hastened, ironically, by our own hand.

Against this, the unstated but obvious motivation behind the intelligent design agenda is to inculcate students with religious ideology, namely, Christian monotheism. However, it appears that the champions of intelligent design theory are unaware that the very arguments they advocate in fact entail exactly the opposite of what they intend.

First, intelligent design theory does not evoke an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent Lord. The problematic design and superfluousness of some organs, not to mention the existence of famine, pestilence and suffering, all point to flaws in nature rather than perfection. Thus, if design in nature is the result of some intelligent being, it is entirely possible that the earth was an early, mediocre experiment of an infantile deity who abandoned this undertaking and moved on to bigger and better projects elsewhere.

Second, consonant with deism, the favored theology of the founders of this nation, God may have constructed this world, set it in motion, and departed, ultimately unconcerned with humanity and our fortune or fate -- hardly the loving and caring God of Christianity.

Third, elaborate and intricate projects require a team effort. So, according to intelligent design theory, design in nature hints of a cooperative effort by a committee of gods. Laughably, pagan polytheism is probably not what pundits of intelligent design theory intend to promulgate.

The question of why the cosmos exists or why evolution should have occurred at all is a philosophical and theological quandary. As religious conjecture, intelligent design theory has absolutely no place in the biology curriculum.

From a scientific standpoint, to elucidate the complexity of nature by positing the existence of some supernatural numinous force beyond the pale of sensory experience is utterly devoid of explanatory power. Explaining one mystery (life) with another mystery (God) is neither intellectually satisfying nor academically honest.

Intelligent design theory deserves discussion in seminary and courses on religion. But foisting intelligent design theory onto students of biology is a waste of scarce public education resources, especially in a state where concerns about the wise use of taxpayer money are so conspicuous.

David R. Keller is associate professor of philosophy at Utah Valley State College.