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ID's Unlikely Defender

Seeking God in Science

By Tom Gilson | Published Date: July 28, 2009

Supporters of intelligent design are accustomed to fending off charges that ID is a front for creationism, a theocratically inspired ploy to sneak God and religion into the public schools and effectively put an end to real science in our country.

Barbara Forrest, a professor of philosophy in Louisiana, puts it this way:

In promoting “intelligent design theory”—a term that is essentially code for the religious belief in a supernatural creator—as a purported scientific alternative to evolutionary theory, the ID movement continues the decades-long attempt by creationists either to minimize the teaching of evolution or to gain equal time for yet another form of creationism in American public schools.

A new book challenges those assumptions, arguing that ID actually is science, that it is not necessarily tied to belief in God, that it is distinct from creationism, that it is not primarily politically motivated, that it can be appropriate for inclusion in public school science curricula, and that it is not the basis of some deep theocratic conspiracy.

The book argues further that for those who are primarily concerned with the pursuit of truth, those cultural hot buttons are the wrong issues to worry about anyway. Intelligent design is a valid and genuine search for explanation, a quest for understanding, a pursuit of truth; and it is manifestly worthwhile for those reasons regardless of what social issues may be attached to it.

A book like this must have been written by one of the presumed anti-science religious ideologues against which Forrest was warning, probably one of the “creationists” at the Discovery Institute. Right?

It is certainly true that the author has been called a creationist. But he is not a Discovery Institute fellow; he is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado. And he is an atheist.

His name is Bradley Monton, and his forthcoming book, published by Broadview Press, is titled *Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design*. Monton is a living, breathing refutation of charges that ID is necessarily tied to a religious agenda. He really isn't all that interested in agendas, in fact.

“I’ve been told that the battle over intelligent design is like a war between two camps,” he writes, “but one of the purposes of this book is to transcend that.” Perhaps that sounds idealistic. An early reviewer warned him that if he tried to remain neutral on the “cultural war” represented by ID, he would necessarily “serve one side.” Monton responds, “my goal is simply to evaluate the arguments on both sides as objectively as I can. If this ends up serving one side more than the other, I don’t care; my goal is to do the best I can to get at the truth.”

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It is hard to describe how refreshing that feels to an ID supporter such as myself. As a writer on science and faith issues, I find that when it comes to intelligent design, most of my energies are focused on getting opponents to see ID for what it is, not as they have misunderstood or distorted it in their own thinking. [John G. West](#), senior fellow at the Discovery Institute, says, "Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the discussion over intelligent design is that it is hampered not just by ignorance, but also by serious misunderstandings about what the theory proposes and what its supporters want."

Monton is willing to evaluate ID according to what its proponents actually affirm about it. He devotes most of a chapter to working through what the Discovery Institute genuinely means in its most basic statement of the theory. Unlike many others, he sees no reason to suppose--at least until proven otherwise--that ID proponents are mendacious conspirators. He argues effectively that opponents' most frequently-stated dismissals of ID ("it's purely religion," for example, or "it isn't science") fail when subjected to thoughtful analysis.

For this, predictably, he has taken significant pressure from ID opponents, especially for opinions he has written on the famous Dover, Pa., intelligent design trial. He disagreed with Judge Jones' opinion that ID is not science, and noted wryly that "a consequence of Jones's criteria is that the aim of science is not truth." His assessment of testimony given there by another philosopher, Robert Pennock, provoked a very public response from Pennock himself. It began with [a paper Monton posted](#) about the Dover case, criticizing Pennock's testimony on philosophical grounds, among other things. (The paper is an excellent preview to the book.)

Pennock in return slammed him in [an editorial](#) on the *U.S. News & World Report* website, accusing him of committing character assassination and (incredibly) doing harm to his department and possibly the whole discipline of philosophy. The dispute moved to [Monton's blog](#) and spilled over even to [my own](#).

Readers may judge for themselves which of the disputants handled himself more professionally; and any who have ever thought philosophy lacked drama will likely find themselves cured of that.

How can an atheist take a position like Monton's? It seems to start in his being interested in the theory and simply trying to understand whether it's true or not. It continues in his believing (and arguing) that ID is not necessarily tied to belief in God.

It is of course not necessarily *disconnected* from belief in God, either. He makes no positive argument in favor of atheism in the book; it's not in his purposes to do so. "Ultimately," he writes, "I hold that the intelligent design arguments do not provide that much evidence for the existence of God (or similar designer), but the arguments do have some force--they make me less certain of my atheism than I would be had I not heard the arguments."

Though his arguments are philosophical and scientific in nature, his presentation will be accessible to most lay readers. He takes an even-handed approach to the pros and cons of intelligent design. His conclusions with respect to intelligent design are surprisingly supportive, considering that they come from one who disbelieves in a superior being.

In the end, though, he remains committed to his atheism. He does so by way of alternatives to design that seem stretched rather thin, on my view. To summarize his arguments and my own objections to them here, though, would be to do them the same kind of injustice he has refused to do to pro-ID arguments. To state them briefly would be to distort them.

The other important question is what this book will contribute to the ID controversy. Is an atheist's defense an unconditional blessing for intelligent design? Not necessarily. Ironically, it could end up being the most dangerous force ID has ever encountered. And that's a good thing.

That last paragraph was confusing, I'll wager. (It's probably no worse than finding out about an atheist who supports intelligent design.) I'll try to clarify what I mean.

More than once in my blogging I have offered ID antagonists a bit of tongue-in-cheek “strategy advice.” I tell them, “I’m going against my own best interests with this, but if you want to attack intelligent design, you really ought to quit aiming at the wrong targets. You attack it as creationism, but it isn’t that. You attack it as being an anti-science campaign, but it isn’t that, either. You attack it as a theocratic political ploy, and that’s not what it is, either. Here’s my advice: If you want to *defeat* ID for what it really is, maybe you should to *attack* it for what it really is: a scientific and philosophical approach to exploring origins.”

Bradley Monton is not attacking intelligent design. He does ID proponents an obvious service by defining from a neutral perspective what ID really is, or at least what really *matters* about ID in the long run: not the cultural baggage that has been attached to it from various sources, but its genuine scientific and philosophical approach to exploring origins.

If ID’s opponents pay attention to his book, he might do them even more of a service than what he is providing for proponents. He might actually help them to get on the right topic, to aim at the right target. The real question is not whether ID is a pseudo-science, whether it is a cultural subterfuge, or whether it is “[The New Stealth Creationism](#),” as it has been called. Monton shows that none of these are what matters. They may have some passing rhetorical or political interest, but the real question, the one that counts, is this: Is intelligent design *true*?

Maybe (am I thinking too idealistically?) more ID opponents will take that up as the real question. Maybe they’ll turn their attention away from cultural side issues to what intelligent design really affirms, the positive arguments it presents for its position, and focus their attacks more sharply there. But even that, were it to happen, would be a service to intelligent design. Let the argument be over the real issue, *Is intelligent design true?* It could only do both sides good.

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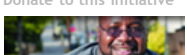
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