

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

<sup>3</sup>Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Gen 1:1-5  
Davis United Methodist Church

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## **Hot Topics for Cold Weather: Intelligent Design**

Three weeks ago, in one of the biggest courtroom clashes between conservative Christianity and evolution since the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, a federal judge barred a Pennsylvania public school district from reading a statement casting doubt on evolution and mentioning "intelligent design" in biology class.

U.S. District Judge John E. Jones delivered an animated attack on the Dover Area School Board, saying its decision to insert intelligent design into the science curriculum violates the constitutional separation of church and state. A six-week trial, in which intelligent design scientists as well as theologians testified, yielded "overwhelming evidence" establishing that intelligent design "is a religious view, a mere re-labeling of creationism, and not a scientific theory." The judge was immediately labeled as activist but, Jones, a Republican and a churchgoer was appointed to the federal bench three years ago by President Bush. <sup>i</sup>

Intelligent design proposes that some features of the natural world are best explained as the product of an intelligent cause rather than the undirected processes of evolution such as variation and natural selection. It is not Biblical literalism. Proponents of Intelligent Design do not believe the earth was created in six days, that Earth is ten thousand years old, or that the fossil record was deposited during Noah's flood. They shun the label Creationism. They accept that some evolutionary change occurred.

Michael J. Behe, a professor of biological sciences at Lehigh University, and a leading proponent of Intelligent Design, is a biochemist who writes technical papers on the structure of DNA. His book "Darwin's Black Box" published in 1996 claims that cells contain structures that are "irreducibly complex." This means that if you remove any single part from such a structure, the structure no longer functions. Behe compares it to a mousetrap. If you remove any of the parts, such as the spring from a mousetrap, it isn't slightly worse at killing mice; it doesn't kill them at all. So too, with the bacterial flagellum, with its roughly thirty different proteins, all precisely arranged, and if any one of them is removed the flagellum stops working. Behe concludes that irreducibly complex cells arise the same way as irreducibly complex mousetraps –someone designs them. He says design should not be overlooked simply because it's so obvious. <sup>ii</sup> But many critics of intelligent design consider it pseudo -science, no more deserving of a

hearing in a science classroom than astrology. They say its' hypotheses can not be tested, observed or repeated, and therefore it is not science.

Last August, President Bush affirmed that he was in favor of teaching intelligent design in public schools, saying "I think that part of education is to expose people to different schools of thought." A couple of weeks later, Senator Bill Frist, the Republican leader, made the same point. Teaching both intelligent design and evolution "doesn't force any particular theory on anyone," Frist said.<sup>iii</sup> Meanwhile, more than eighty per cent of Americans say that god either created human beings in their present form (creationism) or guided their development (intelligent design).<sup>iv</sup> As Christians, we need to understand the biblical and theological aspects of the debate. The ways people have related science and religion may be placed in four categories: conflict, independence, dialogue and integration.<sup>v</sup>

The first verse of the Bible says, "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.*" The earliest Christian Creed, the Apostles' Creed, says: "*I believe in God ... creator of Heaven and Earth.*" In the fourth century, Augustine had said that when there appears to be a conflict between demonstrated knowledge and a literal reading of the Bible, scripture should be interpreted metaphorically. Interpreting scripture metaphorically has a long history. In commenting on the first chapter of Genesis, Augustine said that the Holy Spirit was not concerned about "the form and shape of the heavens" and "did not wish to teach human beings things not relevant to their salvation."

Medieval writers acknowledged diverse literary forms and levels of truth in scripture, and they offered symbolic or allegorical interpretations of many passages. Galileo, in his controversy with the church over Copernican theory in which the earth and the planets revolve in orbits around the sun, rather than the established theory in which the sun and planets revolve in orbits around the earth, quoted a cardinal of his own day: "The intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes." So long before Darwin, Christian thinkers struggled with the meaning of portraying God as "maker of heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible" in the words of the Nicene-Creed.<sup>vi</sup> (Both the Apostle's and Nicene Creed are printed in the back of our hymnal.)

Even in Darwin's day, most theological conservatives accepted symbolic rather than literal interpretations of the seven days of creation in Genesis and accepted evolution, though they often insisted on the special creation of the human soul. The liberals spoke of evolution as God's way of creating. In Victorian England, however, many people saw the claim that we are "descended from apes" as a denial of the value of persons. "The survival of the fittest" seemed to undercut morality, especially when it was extrapolated into the social order to justify ruthless economic competition and colonialism.<sup>vii</sup> Christians resisted this application of a scientific theory into the realm of how we should live our lives. If God is love, we should care for the weakest in society and give every person dignity regardless of how frail.

Darwin himself believed that God had designed the whole evolutionary process but not the detailed structures of particular organisms. “I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. . . I cannot think that the world as we see it is the result of chance; yet I cannot look at each separate thing as the result of Design.”<sup>viii</sup>

Some Protestants have advocated an explicit separation of science and religion, taking the Bible seriously, but not literally. God can be known only as revealed in Christ and acknowledged in faith. God is the transcendent, the wholly other, and unknowable except as self-disclosed. Religious faith depends entirely on divine initiative, not on human discovery of the kind occurring in science. Science is based on human observation and reason, while theology is based on divine revelation.<sup>ix</sup>

Protestant theologian Langdon Gilkey explained in his 1965 book "Maker of Heaven and Earth," that science seeks to explain objective, public, repeatable data. Religion asks about the existence of order and beauty in the world and the experiences of our inner life, such as guilt, anxiety, and meaninglessness, on the one hand, and forgiveness, trust, and wholeness, on the other). Science asks objective “how” questions. Religions ask personal “why” questions about meaning and purpose and about our ultimate origin and destiny. Gilkey testified at the Arkansas creationism trial that the doctrine of creation is not a literal statement about the history of nature but a symbolic assertion that the world is good and orderly and dependent on god in every moment of time.<sup>x</sup> Gilkey also argues that inserting God as designer in the gaps of scientific knowledge, gives too small a role to God, who created from nothing when the earth was formless and void.

Ian Barbour, professor emeritus of physics and religion at Carleton College (my alma mater) , says, “I suggest that the concept of God is not a hypothesis formulated to explain the relation between particular events in the world in competition with scientific hypotheses. Belief in god is primarily a commitment to a way of life in response to distinctive kinds of religious experience in communities formed by historic traditions; it is not a substitute for scientific research. Religious beliefs offer a wider framework of meaning in which particular events can be contextualized.”<sup>xi</sup> Barbour promotes dialogue and integration in “a theology of nature in which one asks how nature as understood by science is related to the divine as understood from the religious experience of a historical community.”<sup>xii</sup>

What one must not do, he says, is to ignore or twist scientific evidence to fit an existing philosophical prejudice about the nature of God – or argue for a ‘god’ to fill holes in present knowledge. If we use God to explain the gaps in scientific knowledge, then when the gaps are explained by science we are left with no God.

Jonathan Neal of Purdue University, Indiana, comments in a recent article: “The ID (intelligent design) movement has tried to frame this debate as Religion versus Science. It is not. The ID debate is between an ID theology that is anti-science and competing theologies that are capable of incorporating scientific knowledge into their theological

framework.”

Pope John Paul II, who embraced the theory of evolution has said, “Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world in which both can flourish.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Science does not provide an overall worldview, a philosophy of life, or a set of ethical norms. Religion recommends a way of life, elicits a set of attitudes, and encourages allegiance to particular moral principles. People in every age have sought to locate their lives within a cosmic order. Human interest in origins may be partly speculative or explanatory, but it is mainly motivated by the need to understand who we are in a larger framework of meaning and significance. Stories, rituals, and religious practices bind us together in communities of shared memories, assumptions, and strategies for living. United Methodists are one such historic community of faith that understands our lives as permeated with grace. The good news is that our Christian faith teaches us liberation from guilt through forgiveness, the replacement of anxiety with trust in God, and the transition from brokenness to wholeness.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10545387/>

<sup>ii</sup> H. Allen Orr “Why intelligent design isn’t” *The New Yorker*, 2005-05-30

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, “*Intelligent design or natural selection?*” *Sacramento Bee*, Monday, September 12, 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion* (HarperSanFrancisco) 2000, pp. 1-2.

<sup>vi</sup> Barbour, *op. cit.* pp7-8.

<sup>vii</sup> Barbour, *op. cit.* p.9.

<sup>viii</sup> Charles Darwin, letters to Asa Gray (22 May and 26 Nov. 1860), in Francis Darwin, *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1887), pp. 312, 378.

<sup>ix</sup> A good introduction is Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949).

<sup>x</sup> Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959) and *Creationism on Trial* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), pp. 108-16.

<sup>xi</sup> Barbour, *op. cit.* p. 14.

<sup>xii</sup> Barbour, Metaviews 099, 30 November 2000; talk originally presented at the American Academy of Religion, Nashville, 19 November 2000.

<sup>xiii</sup> “Message of his Holiness John Paul II,” in *John Paul II on Science and Religion: Reflections of the new View from Rome*, ed. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, S.J., and George V. Coyne, S.J. (Vatican: Vatican observatory, 1990), p. M13.