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ISCAST BULLETIN

Arguments against Intelligent Design



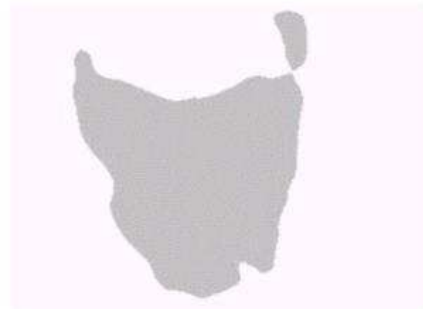
Baldness



Bumble bee flight



George Bush



Tasmania

INTELLIGENT DESIGN?

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Editorial

Well, this is my second Bulletin, which in the absence of a sexy name I have been referring to it as 'The Bull'. And what an issue! Intelligent Design has made the newspapers and magazines such The Bulletin and Australasian Science, and so on. Some of our politicians appear to be endorsing it, or at least leaving the door open to it being taught. There is a group currently circulating a DVD to schools extolling the truth of this approach. These developments have alarmed many people, atheist and Christian alike. In the midst of this debate we need to keep a few things clear in our minds.

The first is that of unity. Paul laboured the point very hard in 1 Corinthians that we need to be careful in avoiding the party spirit that divides those who have been united by the Spirit of God, one faith, one Lord, one baptism. Galatians is about the unity of two very different first century Christians; Jews and Gentiles. Whatever else we might think about those proponents of views differing to our own, it is important to realise that we have something more important in common with them than not.

I highlight this because I had a rather difficult conversation with a young Earth creationists one lunch after church. The conversation was heated but affable. It was also very frustrating and it would have been too easy to classify this person as an idiot and dismiss them. All too easy, all too unChristian.

The second principle is to therefore find a way in which to engage in dialogue with these people in a Spirit of charity and openness to the truth. Now truth is a rather slippery idea in our post-modern age. For the Christian, truth is a person, the centre of our apologetic as Simeon Payne reminds us in his excellent article. But as a critical realist, I am always open to the prospect that my pre-suppositions will need to change, that my ideas are only provisional. For the thoughtful Christian, this will mean that we won't be frightened by the latest scientific discovery because we can break the connection between a previously held idea and the biblical texts. If the big bang were falsified tomorrow, how many books linking cosmology to Genesis would need to be rewritten? Would that be a loss? Ultimately not.

It is in this that we stand apart from some creationists, who seek absolute comfort and epistemological certainty in a fundamentalist huddle. But we need to live with uncertainty. We see dimly now and hope for things not seen. We need to be able to pray for help in our unbelief. But this won't always equate to a rigid view in the face of all opposition. One thing that struck me about my discussion with the creationists was his claim that we can have absolute trust in God's word. What he was claiming was that 'creationary evolutionists' don't. Of course, we object by saying our faith is in God, and in his word, but not in a particular reading.

But what then will our humility do, how does it function

in such a dialogue. Should we be open to the possibility that ID will ultimately be correct? Perhaps, but it would be more helpful to simply to acknowledge that God is greater than us all, and whatever we think we know about the way the world works, the truth is always going to be far more complicated and wonderful. Perhaps this too is a problem for ID and related ideas, that it seeks to make the complex far too simple.

Humility will also acknowledge total depravity, the idea that the mind can and does reject the truth that God presents in all its forms. And yet I believe 'creationists' of all forms greatly overstate this—their attitude to various dating techniques being a case in point. We need to affirm the Imago Dei, the image of God. At COSAC, Adam was affirmed as Homo Scientia. As Christians in science, can we claim that this part of Homo is being redeemed?

What do we concede if anything to ID? Should God be an hypothesis that we are willing to include in our everyday working as scientists? John Russell thinks this should be the case, and argues that the 2nd law of thermodynamics needs to be overcome for eschatology to have meaning. This is an implication of his process theism, something of which I am not (at this time) convinced of. I wonder whether or not science on its own terms is ill equipped for such a hypothesis. Indeed, perhaps its very function is to ignore this hypothesis as Laplace did if it is to advance. Maybe we need to think beyond science back a few centuries to *natural philosophy* and stop being so compartmentised?

Finally, we are all creationists. If you are a member of a mainline denomination then chances are that you recite some creed at least some of the time, that affirms God as creator. We need to be clear to the secular media and our 'creationist' friends that we are in no doubt that all that is, seen and unseen is the work of a mighty God, not the random outworking of blind laws, not something that is common but something that is special.

This issue contains the (far more thoughtful) musings of a number of individuals. There is no "official" position on ID by ISCAST as far as I know, but I've yet to meet one ISCASTIAN who does endorse it.

Simeon Payne's piece is from the cutting edge of ministry. We have the letters and dialogues from practicing scientists. I suspect that this issue is but a fraction of what can be said on the topic, and I do hope that it will provoke you to put finger to keyboard. Also, think ahead of COSAC 2009 which coincides with the sesquicentenary of The Origin. This would make a marvellous topic for a conference! *Ed.*

Intelligent Design—should we endorse it?

Simeon Payne is the Baptist Chaplain at the University of Western Sydney. s.payne@uws.edu.au

In mid October, *Intelligent Design* became a media item as a broad collection of Scientists and Science educators wrote an open letter to national newspapers criticising the teaching of *Intelligent Design* in high school science classes. Previously, our Federal Education Minister had to clarify an earlier comment of his restricting his support of *Intelligent Design*, (ID) to the context of religious education classes. The issue is alive and well! It is in the media and it is especially on the minds of many scientists.

Intelligent design (ID) is a deceptively complex issue with numerous interwoven issues. It is not just an issue of “is God the creator of life”. It raises numerous theological issues, as to the nature of Gods presence; and issues as to how and why we conduct apologetic discussion. It also re-ignites the broader issue as to the relationship between Christianity and Science and Christianity and society in general. It is for these reasons I encourage all Christian pastors to actively engage and think through the issues of the debate, and dare I say so, to do it in an intelligent and savvy manner.

In order to understand this movement, I need to sketch a brief history of its main proponents. Three Americans are prominent in *Intelligent Design*: Phillip E. Johnson, a Lawyer turned pop-Apologist; William Dembski, a man with recognised degrees in Psychology, Theology, Philosophy & Mathematics; and Michael Behe, a Professor of Bio-Chemistry. Numerous others have joined in the debate, but I consider these three to be the most influential players in it.

Phillip E Johnson’s 1993 text *Darwin on Trial* sets much of the tone for ID. His argument is essentially that Darwinian Evolution is not proven objective science, but is a belief system promulgated by scientists with an atheistic agenda. In his later 2000 text, *The Wedge of Truth* he outlines the tactics of his *Discovery Institute* which is essentially to undermine confidence in Evolutionary Theory by the use of strategic case points (or *wedges*), a tactic resonating with the Legal Defence model of his background.

William Dembski, greatly influenced by Johnson, wrote in 1998 *The Design Inference* and many other texts since then. His position is that it is philosophically not possible for a universe as complex as ours to have evolved through chance and essentially the Design aspects of our natural world infer an intelligent creator.

The trio was complete with the independent arrival of Michael Behe and his text *Darwin’s Black Box* in 1996.

His argument revolves around a term he has coined - *Irreducible Complexity* - where he argues that some Bio-Chemical devices and processes are so complexly integrated that it is impossible for them to have evolved to the complexity that they hold today.

Before I go any further, it is only right for me to put on the table an explanation of who I am. I am an evangelical Christian who approaches Scripture with a critical historical-genre approach. For me, the literary or genre intent of Genesis 1-11 is not to be a modernist scientific text, but a thematic or theological backdrop or prologue in which the call of Abram and salvation history that leads to Christ. On theological grounds I have no problems with an old universe or the evolution of life from common descent. My interest is the ultimate meaning of it all, not the mechanics of how it has developed or progressed. I must also put one other consideration on the table. As a Chaplain at the coal-face of a University with a strong science basis, I have a very real and pressing day-to-day pastoral and apologetic concern with all of the issues that ID raises.

I have grave concerns about where an uncritical adoption of ID would lead the Christian Church in the decades to come

So you know where this article is headed, let me state it upfront: I am not a fan of ID. In fact, I have grave concerns about where an uncritical adoption of ID would lead the Christian Church in the decades to come. May I stress that I am not a scientist so I do not propose to critique the science of ID. In this article I want to concentrate on what I am qualified to talk on, its apologetic and theological implications.

As a brief comment regarding the scientific claims of ID, I want to make the reader briefly aware that some of the biggest critics of ID come from *within* the ranks of Christian scientists. The notion that ID is *the* Christian response to non-Christian science is a very inaccurate caricature. Some of these Christians I refer the reader to include; Denis O Lamoureux Assistant Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Alberta who has directly debated Phillip E Johnson and highlighted many misunderstandings and misrepresentations that he has made. Howard J Van Till, Professor of Astronomy and Physics at Calvin College who has raised many significant concerns over Dembski’s mathematical assumptions and Kenneth R Miller, a Biochemist at the University of Colorado who has addressed many of Behe’s “irreducibly complex” concerns. Keith B Miller, a geologist from Kansas Sate University has edited an excellent text which addresses the concerns raised by ID, and those generally against evolution. In Australia, *ISCAS* and in the UK the *Victoria Institute* and *Christians in Science* which jointly publish the excellent peer review journal *Science and Christian Belief* have all published various journal articles addressing misunderstandings and misrepresentations that ID has.

Intelligent Design

But it is the theological and apologetic weaknesses of ID that I now wish to concentrate on.

Theologically, I argue that their ultimate view of God is actually *too small*. The picture they present of God is a god whose creating was so badly performed that He has to constantly intervene to move it all along and fix it all up. I'm sorry, but the God I believe in is far more competent than this. Thirteen or so billion years back, the master mathematician brilliantly "let it rip" with enough energy (not too much and not too little, and timed to perfection!) that here we all are in our brilliant and Universe today. What an awesome God! I would argue that the Biblical support for God intervening in the natural order, in matters which *do not* involve human sin or the Incarnation is not at all strong. The Spirit is always with, amongst and sustaining His creation (Gen 1:2), but the normal 'mode of operation' is something gentle and non-forceful (1 Kings 19:12).

I argue that ID has an improper theological nuance at this point. Essentially it is arguing an either/or approach to God's interaction with His creation. Either God is fully active and fixing it up (constantly!) or is a Deistic remote being. I argue that Biblically informed understanding of the nature of God's activity falls between these two extremes. God *is* constantly involved with His creation, but out of true love gives freedom to His creation to grow and develop as it so wonderfully has. Upon this major theological weakness, a number of significant apologetic weaknesses appear.

The central argument of ID has all been raised before. Two hundred years ago, William Paley's text *Evidences* was all the rage. Paley's argument was essentially the same. He outlined numerous examples of the wonder of creation, and using the analogy of the watch maker making a machine of perfection, used it as his "proof" for God. Whilst in the short term it might have had a positive apologetic impact, it had a far longer negative impact. It is, what we call, a *god of the gaps* argument: If you cannot explain something, then "god" is the answer. Whilst the problem with this argument is not immediately apparent, it backfires horrendously over time. As science progresses and as its mysteries are explained, your "god" becomes smaller and smaller, which is exactly what happened in the nineteenth century.

Right now, ID is obsessed with flagellum, the brilliant bio-mechanical devices, which have become one of ID's chief "proofs" of the divine requiring direct creation. Medium term apologetic disaster will be upon us if we peg our apologetic reliance upon flagellum, as it is only a matter of time before this "god of the gaps" argument is invalidated by advancing scientific understanding. As a general comment, I detect a strong sci-

entific naivety amongst ID, and their closely related cousins, Creationists concerning scientific developments in the theory of evolution over the past decade or so. In the same way that DNA evidence has revolutionised the legal system, so too DNA and RNA tracking is revolutionising the detective work of unravelling the origins of life. So many of the "gaps" in our knowledge concerning the specifics of evolution that we might have previously had, are now fast disappearing. I would suggest strongly that it is only a matter of time before the mystery of flagellum is understood and explained.

A second apologetic problem is also presented by ID that I suspect of which most Christians would not be aware. If you accept ID's argument of the need for an interventionist intelligent designer, who is to say that this is actually the God of the Bible? It could be the gods of polytheism, or in the case of the *Raelian Cult* (who right now have hopped right into the slip-stream of ID) the Intelligent Designers are in fact Aliens. Just because ID is presented by Christians, doesn't mean to state that the result will be the Christian God. Apologetically, ID is the product of a Christendom thinking, hence the reasons why it has originated and finds such strong popularity from the U. S. It sounds plausible in a society where Christianity or Atheism is your only two options, but it is quickly scuttled in any pluralistic or "non-Christian" environment.

A third major apologetic problem is this. Apologetics should always be exclusively *Christo-centric* and ID isn't. My aim, and I hope the aim of all Christians, is for all people to find repentance and salvation in Christ, and Christ alone. Let us say for one moment that ID *is* correct and has *no* objectors. Does it actually mean that the recipient will be led to Christ? The answer is not necessarily. As I've argued above, it could lead them to Islam, Hinduism or 1001 other options. Apologetically, why are we taking people on a needless and potentially dangerous detour? The best apologetic route is always the direct route to Christ, and the ID detour is not only long and cumbersome, but again it may have irreparable potholes.

My fourth apologetic concern with ID is more general, and is essentially this. If you adopt ID's arguments, do you also realize what else you might unwittingly adopt? Most Christians might be completely unaware that Phillip E Johnson has actively supported a campaign that HIV is *not* the cause of the AIDS virus, which is scientifically preposterous and medically and socially irresponsible. The *Discovery Institute* which is the chief promulgator of ID was co-founded by US Republican politician Bruce Chapman which severely questions a claimed neutral political pretence of ID. There are also issues to do with the internal consistency of ID regarding whether or not it is actually a short earth

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creationist movement. Certainly many statements by *Discovery* and Phillip E. Johnson suggest yes, but it needs to be noted that Behe has written that he definitely accepts an old universe.

My fifth apologetic concern, draws from all of these comments, and is this: ID is neither internally consistent nor is it scientifically or theologically or epistemologically sound. In 2004, Dembski released *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions about Intelligent Design*. Despite its titled promise, it was remarkably sparse on specific details that would commit or clarify ID to certain crucial positions. Despite invitations to address these concerns in peer review journals, Dembski refuses to do so. He argues that the atheistic agenda of science is so pervasive that he would not be able to publish his theory in a peer review journal. Frankly, this is conspiratorial rubbish. Any article that is academic, researched and referenced will always be published in an appropriate academic journal. Publishing a theory or findings in an academic peer review journal, and allowing it to be scrutinised in an academic debate, is a foundational step in it being accepted as academically truthful. As ID has not done this, it is not academically true.

In short ID *sounds* great for the unscientifically, untheologically or unapologetically trained. Its texts and DVDs are full of great graphics and people in white lab coats who look and sound like scientists. But this in itself is not the proof of its worth. Jehovah's Witnesses *sound* as if they know about Koine Greek, but to those qualified in Koine Greek their translation abilities in their *New World* translation are an offensive con. In the same way Christians are rightly offended by *The Da Vinci Code* and its pseudo-Christian history, we should also feel offended that people go in our name, in this case, with a pseudo-science.

My sixth apologetic concern leading on from the above is this. ID is built on a very flawed understanding of the theory of evolution. Science does not consider the Theory of Evolution to be the most truthful theory to explain our history and origins *because* it has some atheistic (or other) agenda. It does so, because there is a truckload of objective evidence, not just from the Biological sciences, but across all sciences to state that this is the best picture which explains the available evidence.

Evolution in the first instance is *not* about atheism, but about science. Yes, some atheists do justify their belief with evolution, but Christians might also want to seriously consider that some draw the exact *opposite* conclusion, and are driven to awe and wonder of creation, as was the experience of the Psalmist. Evolution *per se* is not the problem: It is the conclusions that one

may or may not draw from it that present wider problems, or opportunities.

I personally feel deeply offended by the assumption of some Christians that science has some secretive "atheistic agenda". At the University where I minister, I find the science staff most receptive in discussing matters of religion, faith, ethics and the like and there are a strong number of known and reflective Christians on staff. Johnson's link of atheism to evolution is a poor "guilt by association" argument. If we follow it through, Christians should campaign to ban all money (as it may lead to greed) and all food (as it may lead to gluttony).

So let me then make this crystal clear. As long as evolution is taught as an objective science (not as *scientism*) with no interpretive comments – whether atheistic, ID, Raelian, Hindu or whatever - I have absolutely no problems with it. By all means, as Christians we should engage with the *meaning* of evolution and proclaim the loving God who is behind and sustains creation, but let's do this away from the context of the science classroom. And may we also be careful not to state or imply scientific comments that we might not be qualified to make, but stick to theological comments that we are qualified to make.

My final and closing plea is this. If Baptists uncritically accept ID, then the damage down the track will be immense and permanent. If, however, we are prepared to publicly separate ourselves from ID, then we place ourselves in better stead to be able to influence the really pressing issues of evolution: our evolution. Over the next few decades, humanity will have the skills to radically alter our evolutionary future. In the past, we have been *passive* regarding evolution's impact on us. Very soon, we will be able to determine exactly what our offspring and their genetic heritage will be.

On the positive, we might be able to discard genetically inherited diseases. On the negative, it could be a *Tower of Babel* experience where humanity idolatrously tries to recreate our image. Where will the Christian voice in this debate be? Will we have lost the right to speak because we refused to speak against ID when we should have? How we respond to ID now, directly relates to what impact we will have on far bigger issues in the years to come. It is for this reason I can only plea with my fellow Baptists – please critically and actively resist the lure of ID. The damage of *not* doing so will permanently stain us.

This article originally appeared in a Baptist publication (hence the reference in the second last paragraph)—Ed.

Unpublished letters by fellows

Dr Alan Gijsbers, Chairman ISCAST, Past Chairman Christian Medical and Dental Fellowship of Australia

The intelligent design battle was lost centuries ago. Isaac Newton, the discoverer of the laws of gravitation postulated that God caused gravity to act, and that God prevented the far-flung stars from rushing together. Further, since motion was more apt to be lost than got, every now and then God had to give the planets a push to ensure their velocity was maintained. Subsequent science has gradually reduced the need for God to be so obviously active in the universe like that. As the gaps in our explanation lessened, so the need to invoke God lessened. Gradually the God of the gaps faded like the grin of a Cheshire cat.

Christians attuned to the philosophy of science therefore despair when the new intelligent design school now resurrects the God of the Gaps argument. We agree that the complexity of the structure of DNA and the intricacies of intracellular mechanisms are difficult to explain, but fail to see how admitting that God made it, helps scientific research to work out how they were made like that.

By contrast for all its problems, a theistic embrace of Darwinism has opened up new ways of seeing biology, geology, cosmology and neuroscience, even if an unthinking embrace of the theory of natural selection has led to such sociological excesses as the Nazi super-race and the excesses of economic rationalism, where the powerful and the rich are justified to exploit the weak and the defenceless.

Intelligent design as a science is sterile, as a philosophy it has some merit, Darwinism as a science is enormously fruitful but as a philosophy it is destructive. Let's keep each theory in its appropriate perspective.

Dr Ken Smith

Dear Editor,

Whoever wrote the headline "Creation crusade marches on, under new banner" got it right. As well as "creationism in a cheap tuxedo", as mentioned in the article, one Christian critic in USA has described it as "the old creationism dressed up in designer clothes".

The article did not mention the large number of scientists who are Christians who are opposed to the concept of "intelligent design" as put forward by its proponents. Down through the ages people have been claiming that something or other couldn't be explained, and so it must be the direct work of God.

These new creationists are simply following in these very dangerous steps. They are apparently not acquainted with how rapidly science is moving forward these days, and it is a safe bet that some of the claims on the DVD have already been provided with a normal scientific explanation. This approach has been given the unflattering label of a "god-of-the-gaps".

There was no mention in the article of whether the alleged "intelligent designer" of our detailed biochemistry is a supernatural being, or simply someone with super-human intelligence. And some of the suggestions which have been proposed here should make any thinking Christian be very wary of supporting this, when so many Christians, with expertise in science, have criticised the approach.

In 1981 in Arkansas there was a trial which resulted in a law mandating the teaching of creationism being declared unconstitutional. As part of the case in support of creationism, one document tendered read, in part:

Intelligent design as a science is sterile, as a philosophy it has some merit ...

"All that creation-science requires is that the entity which caused creation have power, intelligence, and a sense of design. There are no attributes of the personality generally associated with a deity, nor is there necessarily present in the creator any love, compassion, sense of justice, or concern for any individuals. Indeed, under creation-science as defined in Act 590, there is no requirement that the entity which caused creation still be in existence ... "

That should give all thoughtful Christians cause for concern. And that is before we get onto other religious groups who also have doubts about the adequacy of evolution. The Raelians, for example, who are not unknown in Australia, also claim that "intelligent design" is needed. But their designers are extra-terrestrial beings, not supernatural ones.

And if, as claimed, offering various concepts about the origin of life would enhance students' skills, then how about including dreamtime stories from Indigenous people, or some of the ancient Greek, Roman and Norse myths?

Allan J. Day

Sir, As a biological scientist and a Christian with a long personal and professional interest in the Science Religion interface I would like to both comment and express some concern at the proposals to teach Creationism and Intelligent Design (ID) reported in your front page article (Age, Sat Aug 6).

I would maintain that the ID position which considers that there are certain aspects of nature which are of “irreducible complexity” and therefore cannot intrinsically be explained without resort to some non scientific principle of design is flawed philosophically, scientifically and theologically.

Philosophically it conflates metaphysics with physics (science). The Christian (and indeed Jewish and Muslim) doctrine of creation asserts that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos. As such this represents a (metaphysical) world view which is opposed by secular humanists who deny the activity of a Creator. Scientists who hold either of these world views however can (and do) maintain that the exploration of nature in all of its complexity should be explored by scientific methods – by doing more and better science to plug the many gaps that exist in our scientific knowledge.

Scientifically the major basis for the ID claims (as indicated in the article) originates from the detailed examples described by Michael Behe. Many of these examples of “irreducible complexity” have been exploded by subsequent scientific work as has been discussed by Kenneth Miller (who is both a prominent Catholic layman and eminent US biological scientist) in his book “Finding Darwin’s God”. Some more recent comment may be explored on www.talkdesign.org.

Theologically the god of ID is understood as a “god of the gaps- a cog in the machine, as part of a scientific explanation, rather than the Christian God of the bible or of the creeds- “God the Creator of heaven and earth”. We are thus as Christians presented with a theology that sells God short – a God who is too small.

I would make a plea for some critical thinking about these issues, before Christians and those engaged in Christian education and science are seduced into pursuing such an inadequate view of both science and religion.

Allan J. Day (Emeritus Professor, University of Melbourne)

The following is an extract from an email from Jonathon Clark, Geologist and former editor of the ISCAST Bulletin.

While the ID crowd have some things of interest to say they, are indeed just a revamped God of the gaps and the Paylean argument from design in a more modern form.

Their refusal to engage with the theological issues this engenders is their greatest weakness, it is also a deliberate strategy, to try and show to the secular world they are nothing but scientists and philosophers. It also hides from their Christian constituency that some of their people are not Christian - at least one is a Moonie.

Their second weakness is to muddy the waters with terms like "methodological naturalism", "operations science" and "origins science". The fact that some leading Christian philosophers in the US (i.e. Plantiga) are also confused does not help.

Their third weakness is that they are their refusal to come clean on the age of the earth. This is to try and hide the fact that they have strong links with the young earthers, at least one of their leading people is a strong young earther.

Fourthly, the movement is strongly driven by a US political agenda - the "renewal" of US society and culture through the destruction of materialism via it's supposed foundation of "methodological naturalism", the greatest strength of which is supposed to be evolution. The export of this US agenda, redolent with the culture wars, to the rest of the world, is of grave concern.

Of course the other side, as illustrated by some truly appalling stuff in nature recently, is no better.

I think that it behoves CIS and ISCAST to strong engage with these issues especially in the areas are the ID ground are weak - theology, philosophy, and the historical sciences. We also need to engage them where they are superficially strong - information theory, molecular biology. With the looming sesquicentenary of The Origin these issues are only going to loom larger.

Summary

The above correspondence gives you some of the flavour of what many in ISCAST think about this issue. It is rather sad that a number (if not all) of these letters did not get published. How loud do we need to shout to be seen to be the middle voice of a scientifically and biblically informed view?

I recommend to all associates and fellows to think carefully, prayerfully and write in and out of season so that the world will see the foolishness of the cross, not of a viewpoint that has some merit but ultimately founders, selling God, his word and his creation well short of their worth. **Ed.**

Theologically the god of ID is understood as a “god of the gaps- a cog in the machine, as part of a scientific explanation, rather than the Christian God of the bible

Reviews

Dawkins' God, Genes, Memes, And The Meaning Of Life. Alister McGrath (2005) Blackwell Publishing.

Reviewed by David Goldney. David is semi-retired, a visiting Professor in Landscape and Restoration Ecology at the University of Sydney, Orange Campus, Principal Consulting Ecologist with the Western Research Institute and a lay reader in the Uniting Church.

This is a very timely, balanced and readable assault on the influential ideas under-girding Richard Dawkins' persuasive and highly entertaining stable of books spread over three decades. These include the following provocative titles: *The selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker*, *River out of Eden*, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, *Unweaving the Rainbow* and *A Devil's Chaplain*. While it helps to have read the majority of Dawkins' books, McGrath summarises their underlying theses with evenhandedness, wit, admiration and a deceptively simple and lucid writing style. Richard Dawkins FRS is well known as the 'Simonyi Reader, and Professor of the Public Understanding of Science' at Oxford University. He is also affectionately (!) known as 'Darwin's Rotweiler'. Long-time Dawkin watchers will have noted the increasingly stridently atheistic (definitely not agnostic), anti-Christian sentiments that pour from his pen and well-publicized addresses. McGrath, not so well known outside of his field, is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford and holds a PhD in molecular biophysics. He was once an atheist. I wonder how often they meet over lunch?

McGrath identifies four interconnected reasons for Dawkins' hostility to religion and sees these as serious ideas that Christians need to reflect on rather than dismissing out of hand. These are:

- A Darwinian worldview makes belief in God unnecessary or impossible (*The Blind watchmaker*).
- Religion makes assertions grounded in faith representing a retreat from evidence-based truth.
- Religion offers an impoverished and attenuated vision of the world (*Unweaving the Rainbow*).
- Religion leads to evil.

In his chapter on the 'Selfish Gene' McGrath points out that most evolutionary biologists argue that Darwinianism offers a description of reality whereas Dawkins insists that Darwinianism is an explanation, a worldview, a meta narrative. Dawkins re-jigs Monad's idea of blind chance and there being no purpose in the world (teleonomy has displaced teleology) rather proclaiming that there is an illusion of design and purpose that can be explained by chance mutations occurring over huge periods of time. We are here on account of no higher principle than natural selection. McGrath points out that

Darwin himself was somewhat unsettled by the implications of his theory on the identity and status of the human race. In contrast Dawkins applauds the fact that we are animals but is still able to draw the remarkable conclusion in McGrath's view that 'We alone are able to resist our genes' and 'are capable of rebelling against genetic tyranny'. 'So' as McGrath comments, 'there is something different about humanity after all'.

The Blind Watchmaker chapter is fascinating. The Mount Improbable of the 'design' of a human eye, the 'illusion of design' argues Dawkins, can be explained by simple and gradual evolutionary changes overtime that leave no place for God, indeed eliminates God altogether. McGrath reminds us that the

- (1) scientific method is incapable of delivering a decisive adjudication of the God question although it can inform the debate;
- (2) evolutionary process is consistent with various atheist, agnostic and Christian understandings but necessitates none of them, and
- (3) Dawkins is overly reliant on Paley's watchmaker God, a view not typical of the Christian tradition and indeed is an historic aberration (surely a useful lesson from history for both atheist and Christian), overthrown by Newman as a theological liability.

Dawkins' atheism cannot be argued to be grounded in the biological sciences.

McGrath also reminds us that Augustine offered a view of biblical interpretation 'to ensure that Christian theology never became trapped in a pre-scientific world-view'.

McGrath goes on to remind us of the fluctuations in Darwin's view of Deity and the views of a range of scientists and conservative theologians that make it very problematic to suggest that Darwinism necessitates atheism as Dawkins argues.

In the chapter 'Proof and Faith' the gloves really come off. 'Dawkins engagement with theology is superficial and inaccurate, often amounting to little more than cheap point scoring'. For example Dawkins believes that faith 'means blind trust in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.' McGrath sets out to demolish this tenet without mercy, finally turning the tables by arguing that it is Dawkins who makes the leap of faith from agnosticism to atheism. Atheism too is a belief system. It is Dawkins who knows nothing about Christian theology, who is too busy writing books against religion to read works on religion, it is Dawkins who seriously misinterprets Tertullian's view on Christian faith and reason and whose views on faith themselves 'are best regarded as an embarrassment to anyone concerned with scholarly accuracy.' It is Dawkins who underplays the importance of the shifting paradigm in current science world-views, including Darwinianism.

McGrath also has a lot to say about 'memes', the so

Dawkins' atheism cannot be argued to be grounded in the biological sciences.

Reviews/ISCAST reports

called 'cultural replicators', the fundamental units of information which are hypothesized to give rise to cultural artifacts and ideas, and in Dawkins' view analogous to the gene. The importance of this for Dawkins is 'for the god-meme to replicate itself in the human mind', and since further developed by Dawkins in the 'God as a virus' theme. Again McGrath destroys the arguments and turns the table somewhat cheekily by asking if there is a meme for belief in memes themselves?

I was rather spellbound by this book, rather like watching two great boxers in the ring both looking for that crucial knockout blow, although McGrath sees it as 'debate' in the Augustine tradition. I 'watched' the bout three times! And the winner? Well I am unashamedly a fan of both Dawkins and McGrath and a Christian in the Evangelical tradition and perhaps over eager to proclaim victory for McGrath. Hence I call on one of Dawkins' fellow travellers, Michael Ruse the well known Darwinian to deliver his verdict – 'A wonderful book... this is scholarship as it should be-informed, feisty, and terrific fun. I cannot wait to see Dawkins' review of McGrath's critique'. Buy it and read it and ponder on the lost Christian art of ethical, lucid Christian apologetics in the CS Lewis style, rediscovered in this timely book. Why has it taken so long?

ISCAST WEBSITE REPORT: OCTOBER

According to the statistics 892 people visited the ISCAST website in October for a total of 1233 visits and downloading 3437 pages. Now that more new papers are being loaded onto the site people are once again starting to visit.

The most popular papers downloaded were:

- **Genesis 1 – 3: History? Science? Theology?**
By Dr J A Thompson
- **Intelligent Design: Good Science? Good Theology? Or...?** By Prof. Allan Day
- **Genesis and Earth History** by Jonathan Clarke
- **Practising Science in a Secular Society** by Dr Alan Gijbers
- **The Impact of Einstein's Relativity on Christian Thought** by Prof. John Pilbrow

The slides of Prof. Ellis' lectures had figured prominently in previous months but these have dropped off the "most popular" lists probably because, as slides, they have little relevance except for those who attended his lectures. An amateur DVD of his lecture in Melbourne is available from Stockdale ACS on request for a cost of \$10 plus postage and handling.

Many of these papers have direct links attached to them from other sites. Thus John Thompson's paper is re-

ferred to directly from the Tabor College of Victoria site "Old Testament Gateway" (www.otgateway.com/genesis.htm) and Allan Day's paper from the South Australian "blog" Hikanos (www.stmatts.asn.au/blog) in their/his discussion on ID. It is fascinating tracing these links back and finding the context in which the ISCAST website is referred to.

The largest source of visits to our site from other websites is the Dutch portal Theologie.pagina.nl (<http://theologie.pagina.nl/>). This looks a fascinating site, providing links to sites on all sorts of topics relating to theology.

The five most visitors' countries other than Australia were: Germany, Netherlands, USA Educational, Switzerland and Norway.

Report to the ISCAST AGM 2005

Dr Alan Gijbers. State Chairman ISCAST (Vic).

Once again we can thank God at an AGM by reflecting on past events and looking to the future. As I said in a recent Intelligent Design debate, theists see the hand of God not just in the order of creation but also in the messy ambiguity of human history! The spiritual person seeks to discern God's will here and seeks to be faithful in the events of the era. That has been our calling as ISCASTians and we have come now to reflect on how well we have done, and to look to the future.

This year has been a good year, and we all have benefited greatly from the executive role of Stockdale ACS. It has kept us up to the mark and we are feeling the effects of their effectiveness. We have reappointed them for 2006.

Our activities in 2005

26 Feb: Thinklings on *God and Natural Disasters*. Dr Charles Sherlock spoke well and the meeting was very well attended. We placed a report in the ISCAST Bulletin.

30 April & 1 May: ISCAST(Vic)'s second excursion, *God's Story in the Stars*—an astronomy trip to Ballarat. Unfortunately the weather closed in but it was a superb introduction to Cosmology with Assoc. Prof. Michael Drinkwater from Queensland. It was very interesting to hear of his discovery of a whole new order of galaxies and to explore our science-faith understanding in the area of astronomy. (Little did we know that it was a foretaste of cosmological things to come).

14 May: A combined seminar with the CMDF Victoria on "*Cold Comfort: Christian responses to Human Suffering*". Not many attended but the presentations from

Reports continued

Dr Barbara Hayes, palliative care practitioner, Assoc Prof David Clarke a psychiatrist and Dr John Olley, a theologian were outstanding. We are chasing up the papers presented here for publication on the Online Journal.

18 June: A Thinkling on "God and the Weather" by Mick Pope. This was the next stage in Mick's reflections, developing on a Fire in the Belly he had presented last year. He looked at a couple of the weather miracles in the Bible and developed some insights into God's actions in the world. Part of ISCAST's responsibility is to see that such work is encouraged to a suitable point of completion, maybe even as a paper in our Online Journal or the Science and Christian Belief journal (or both!).

Mid July: COSAC 2005: *Cosmology*. It started with George giving the Burgmann Lecture on "Cosmology – Universal Questions" in the Manning Clarke Lecture theatre at ANU. The conference continued at Burgmann College with George giving a further three lectures along with lectures from Assoc. Prof. Robert Stenning on the life of Einstein, Prof John Pilbrow on the impact of relativity on theology, Andrew Sloane reflecting on the incarnation in an Einsteinian universe and Marcus Reeves exploring the relevance of contemporary science to the gospel. ISCAST Vic is responsible for the next COSAC in 2007.

22 July: ISCAST(Vic) annual lecture with Prof. Ellis. This was preceded by a technical lecture at the Department of Physics, the University of Melbourne and a rather sparse informal dinner at University House, Melbourne. This was the first joint venture with the Australian Institute of Physics who were keen to have George speak as part of their Einstein celebrations.

About 600 people spread over two lecture theatres heard George speak on *Curved Space and Compassion: Einstein's cosmology and ethics*. George also gave an informal lecture to me on neuroscience and we have been corresponding on this since. He will be visiting Australia from 20-21 June 2006 at a Conference with Paul Davies on *From Stars to Brains*, Manning Clark House, Canberra.

3 September: Fire in the Belly. Dr Brian Edgar discussed *Science and Beauty* followed by a general discussion on *Intelligent Design: Why all the fuss?* This was well attended and the resultant discussion paper is on the ISCAST website.

15 October: Dr Alan Gijbers gave a Thinkling on *Motivation, Will and Desire*. This ranged over basic neuroscience, motivational theory, ethics and theology. It was well attended and provoked a lot of responsive discussion.

26 November: AGM and Dr Denise Cooper-Clarke will give a fire in the belly on her ethics PhD thesis on *The Difference Between Killing and Letting Die*.

Comments on this year and the next.

There is a growing sense of our role in the wider community: we have the invitation of a regular column in The Melbourne Anglican, members are being approached for comment on issues such as ID, and there was the successful cooperative venture with the Australian Institute of Physics, and we are also looking at future involvement with the CCES.

Excursions are now a part of our calendar, with the successful *God's Story in the Rocks* last year being followed by *God's Story in the Stars* this year. Next year we are planning a session on *God's Story in the Forests* at Toolangi.

Within the ISCAST Vic Executive we thank Ross Macmillan for his role as treasurer, Helen Joynt for coordinating a planned seminar with the CCES on science and faith for CE teachers and for Brian Edgar for coordinating the TMA articles. Alan, Brian and Denise join Stockdale ACS as a COSAC 2007 subcommittee. A special thanks for the superb conative efforts of Stockdale ACS. All ISCAST benefits.

We plan to continue the current format of a mix of Fires in the Belly, Thinklings, excursions and an annual lecture, taking up any other opportunities to develop our role as they arise.

We thank God for healthy finances but realise that is partly due to some generous donations over and above our regular fees. We have decided to give a greater amount to the national body next year, but can do so at present because of our healthy books.

We have had a very successful year and we thank God and those who have stewarded their gifts faithfully.

Has your local chapter of ISCAST been active? Why not let the wider community know by writing a report for the ISCAST Bulletin, together with some scanned or digital photos of your gatherings, and send them to Mick Pope, the Bulletin editor at:
bulletin@iscast.org.au.

The deadline is February 1st, 2006.

Biography – Because Scientists are People Too!

Name: Michael Wong

When & how I became a Christian:

I'm a so-called "fifth generation" Christian. My great-great-grandfather was a pastor in China. My grandfather distinguished himself as the only elder who never spoke in tongues in a Pentecostal church in Hong Kong. When I was 10, my father decided that the Baptist church a couple of blocks from the extended family's Pentecostal church were "better".

To minimise the "drama" if not "trauma" of leaving we moved over in a very gradual and tactful way. I still remember during that transitional period and from the age of six, I attended 2 Sunday schools and two worships at two very different churches each Sunday.

This early experience of the diversity in the mode of spirituality and the plurality of religious discourses first confused me but soon motivated me to find out what going to church really means. Seven years later when I turned 13, I responded to the altar call at an evangelistic meeting at my church.

Science/faith interests:

I've been struggling with the task of how to break down barriers and to build bridges with people in this post Christian/postmodern age of science and technology, who find the Christian faith does not meet their needs, does not suit their lifestyles, does not make sense to their queries and does not work for their pain and suffering resulting from human evil or natural disasters.

As a psychiatrist actively involved as a clinician and director in the public mental health system and as a researcher in neuropsychiatry, neurophysiology and neuroimaging I am further made acutely aware of the wide schism in the understanding of the human condition between science and faith.

That led me to negotiate with my university and hospital to allow me day release to do a MDiv with a major in theology at the bible college of Victoria in order to help myself resolve the tension and conflicts between my faith and work. While I was there, I completed a research thesis on "consciousness - a theological appraisal in the light of advances in neuroscience".

At present I am a confirmed PhD candidate with the centre for religious study and theology at Monash University doing half time study looking at how "the third discourse" hinted at in the dialogue "what makes us think?" between the late French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the French molecular biologist Jean Pierre Changeux may bridge the naive reductionism of some scientists and the substance dualism of some Chris-

tians.

In short, I argue that an anthropology informed by an ongoing dialogue between theology and neuroscience facilitated by the hermeneutics of renewal (Paul Ricoeur) offers a new way of talking about human experience. This discourse will provide a multi-layered personal narrative that contrasts with the premodern notion of soul; the early modern notion of mind, the late modern notion of brain and the postmodern notion of deconstructed self.

How ISCAST helps you:

The enthusiasm, commitment and wisdom of other ISCAST fellows keep me going in learning how to dialogue between faith and science. Dr Brian Edgar, who introduces me to ISCAST, was my theology lecturer back at BCV. He opens my eyes to how creative theology can be and convinces me that our faith still makes sense in this age of science and technology.

If you want your name and face here, please email me the answers to these questions and a photo. Ed.

I am further made acutely aware of the wide schism in the understanding of the human condition between science and faith



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The deadline for submissions for the next issue of the Bulletin is February 1st.

Word limit for articles is 1,000 words: for letters, reflections and book reviews 600 words. Exceptions may be made in exceptional cases.

Please submit to Mick Pope at bulletin@iscast.org.au