

Science and religion can coexist

By Kenneth L. Woodward

No less a religious authority than the late pope, John Paul II, said that evolution is more than just a hypothesis. It is a thrilling theory that has demonstrated its explanatory power over and over again in diverse scientific disciplines. Intelligent design theory has no such record. Why then, do some religious parents want intelligent design theory taught alongside evolution in America's public school classrooms?

For some religious fundamentalists, this may indeed be a way of making room for God in science classes. But for many parents, who are legitimately concerned about what their children are being taught, I suspect that it is a way of countering those proponents of evolution - and particularly of evolutionary biology - who go well beyond science to claim that evolution both manifests and requires a materialistic philosophy that leaves no room for God, the soul or the presence of divine grace in human life.

It is one thing to bracket the divine in pursuit of scientific truth - after all, there is no way to include God as a factor in a scientific experiment. But it is something else to suppose that scientific methods and the truths thus arrived at constitute the only kind of knowledge we can have.

In science, as in other practices, there are those whose world views are shaped entirely by the methods and disciplines of their work. Thus the Nobel laureate James Watson, co-discoverer of the molecular structure of DNA, declares that "one of the greatest gifts science has brought to the world is continuing elimination of the supernatural." A historian of ideas would immediately recognize this perspective as an echo of the 19th-century clash between proponents of science and religion.

And then there are evolutionists of a more philosophical bent, like Michael Rose of the University of California at Irvine, who use evolution to explain everything, including religion. The penchant to make evolution the intellectual linchpin of a wholly atheist outlook is manifest in the writings of Richard Dawkins, professor of public understanding of science at Oxford University, whose public understanding of human beings is that they are "survival machines" for genes.

It is unlikely that parents who want intelligent design taught on an equal footing with evolution read books by Wilson, Rose or Dawkins. Chances are they are among the Americans who are more likely to believe in the Virgin Birth than in evolution. That tendency appalls some people but should surprise no one.

Most Americans, as they go about constructing lives and building families, making choices and exercising free will, do not think of themselves as gene survival machines or as random products of an impersonal process that whispers, in effect, "I am all that is."

And most Christians do accept the Virgin Birth as part of a larger religious narrative that tells them there is a God who created the world - one who cares so passionately about humankind that his only son took human form.

Simply put, belief in evolution does not compel anything like the personal commitment demanded by religious faith in a divine creator and redeemer. Thus, while it is tempting to pit Genesis against evolution as competing myths of human origins, many Christians, including scientists and theologians,

do embrace evolution.

The danger in intelligent design is not just that it is bad science, but that it seeks to enlist evidence from science in the service of religious truth while denying evolutionary processes like mutation and natural selection.

But the designer God of intelligent design is no more necessary to Christianity (or other monotheisms) than was the deistic God of Newtonian physics. In both cases, God ends up being made in the image of an intellectual system, much like Aristotle's unmoved mover. That is not the God of revelation.

One way out of America's classroom conflict over teaching evolution would be to devise courses that examine the cultural uses to which evolution is put. But such courses would inevitably involve dialogue with religious concepts and perspectives - and thus raise further objections from those who see no place at all for religious ideas in public education.

And so, while I think intelligent design is the wrong approach, I sympathize with those parents who object to the materialist assumptions that can easily color the teaching of evolution, absent any acknowledgment of the claims of religion. Those parents are smart enough to know that, like nature, some teachers abhor a vacuum.