

The Current Brouhaha About Intelligent Design

Colleagues,

Some thoughts.

1. Evolution or Devolution?

In this week's St. Louis Post-Dispatch, local columnist Bill McClellan—beloved whimsical homespun philosopher—made a pitch for “devolution” in the current hassle about evolution. Things do indeed change, but if evolution suggests improvement, things are really NOT getting better. Bill made that perfectly clear—at least for those of us who cherish his kind of clarity. Half a millennium ago Philip Melanchthon agreed. Since Eden things have been going downhill. By the 16th century there was no evidence that the decline was abating. No surprise, he said, since Eden in Genesis 3, it's a fractured world. Sherds do not re-assemble.

2. “Intelligent” and its opposite.

Much of the public media coverage we see and hear these days about “evolution vs. intelligent design” [hereafter EV and ID] regularly presents the brouhaha as a hassle between “intelligent” scientists vs. “less-intelligent” religionists, sometimes called creationists. Strange that the less-intelligent have been granted ownership to the intelligent term with their ID mantra, and the EV promoters do not seek to retrieve it. I wonder why. I think I know. In the ID label the word “intelligent” subtly or not so subtly seems to come with a capital “I.” Both sides sense that, although the ID folks regularly claim that the capital I is not the point of their

proposal. But whether explicit or implicit a capital I means deity. Some, but not all, EV-folks see deity talk as out of bounds, not only in science subjects, but anywhere at all, because for them it is fiction even within its own boundaries. And because “deity” talk is itself such a conflicted term among the religionists, you could never get to the proposed clarity and rationality of science if god-talk got into the mix. For the first question would be: WHOSE god-talk? Not just Muslim or Hindu or Jewish or Christian or Wiccan or whatever. But among each of those major genres, which denomination in that world religion would qualify? Their name is legion.

Back to the term “intelligent.” Seems to me that both sides clearly claim the term. The EV folks are patently making an “intelligent” claim. Even a claim about “design” – “an underlying scheme that governs functioning, developing, or unfolding” [Webster]. If so, the debate is actually between two forms of ID. Even though only one side in the debate is granted ownership of the ID label, the EV protagonists offer their own brand of “intelligent design.” What else is the Darwinian proposal for “the origin of species” and the “descent of man”—just to use the titles of Darwin’s own pioneering books—but that? He was patently proposing “an underlying scheme that governs the functioning, developing and unfolding” of life on our planet. And it was an “intelligent” design. It made sense of the data. None of those following in his train have claimed anything less.

3. Psalm 139: 14 [KJV]

“I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.” Is that holy hoopla for intelligent design?

Surely, but with a twist. I purposely cited the old KJV translation for the sake of the “marvel” in the word marvellous. That puts a twist, a nuance, on the term intelligent. The psalmist’s “Aha!” does not celebrate that it all makes sense—“intellegere” in Latin, to understand—that all my human parts do fit together according to an “underlying scheme.” He goes ballistic beyond that—to a point that doesn’t make sense, that exceeds intellegere. He “marvels.” It’s more than intellegere, it’s mirabilis. Mind-blowing, we say today. Even when you can “intellegere” the “design” (how it works, how it all fits together), the fact that such a design, such a marvel-inducing design even exists, is mind-blowing! And finally all the more when the design-marvel is me! C’est moi! Years ago I came upon a small German devotional book with quotes from Luther about creation. Its title was “Alles ist Wunder.” That’s not “everything is a miracle,” although Luther could also say that. But better is that everything in creation is a “marvel.” At least in our day “miracle” signals something inexplicable. “Marvel” comes even when things are explained, and we still “wonder,” why did this happen at all? Thus Luther can be smitten by something as common as an egg. How does it get formed in the mother bird? How can a bird fabricate stone? And over and over again as a daily routine in a domesticated chicken? Such a “marvelously” symmetrically-shaped stone from the body of a bird—and then just a thin shell? How are the egg’s insides held in place while the shell is being formed around it? And then once the egg is laid, what is the incubation engineering of setting-mama and chick growing inside the egg?

Even for scientific folks who can now “intellegere” the processes (which Luther didn’t know), it is still a “mirabilis.” Why does it happen at all?

The psalmist has to say something to somebody about his own "marvelous design." Just saying "wow!" is understatement. "I will praise thee," he exclaims, and then continues for the rest of Psalm 139 with an I-thou canticle.

The Christian angle in today's EV-ID debate is doxology. Can you do Darwin and doxology? Not to "explain" everything, but to respond to the marvel, and finally the marvel-source, that we encounter in our own personal piece of the world we are—and the world around us?

4. God the creator: Source or Cause?

Seems to me that there's a glitch when Christians let the debate center on "natural causes" vs. "God as cause." The Biblical terms in both OT and NT—so the professional scholars tell me—for creator/creation are misfocused when God is viewed as "cause" of all that exists. "Source, author, origin" are better metaphors for what the Bible is talking about when it speaks of God the creator. The very fact that the major action in Genesis 1 is God "speaking" signals a reality beyond cause/effect sequences. We may not be able to comprehend things apart from cause/effect sequencing (so said Kant), but that signals our limitations. After all we exist on the "pot" side from the master potter—to use another Biblical image. How the potter actually "authors" those pots is on his side of the process—even when you learn a lot about the clay. Most likely we'll never know. And do we need to know?"Fearfully and wonderfully made" points to another kind of response to the mystery. Call it doxology. That is the proper, the fitting, response, says the psalmist. Is there any substantive reason why EV rules out that response? I can't think of any. EV is a design for "intellegere." It surely

doesn't reduce the "mirabilis." EV is marvel too. Mind-blowing insofar as I have even a glimpse of it.

5. Luther and Darwin. Gulp!

Is Luther's creation-theology challenged by "the origin of species" or the "descent of man"? I don't think so. Here's why. Let's check his proposal in the Small Catechism on the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. Below is the text as I memorized it in catechesis at Immanuel Lutheran parochial school (Rock Island, Illinois)—in the late 1930s! THE FIRST ARTICLE: CREATION

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?

I believe that God has made me linked together with all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them;

also clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life; that He defends me against all danger, and guards and protects me from all evil;

and all this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which it is my duty to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

Note what Luther is and is not saying:

- A. No reference at all to the Genesis creation story. "Believing" in creation is a "Creator and me" agenda, not what I believe about Genesis 1-3. It's

what I say and do about myself as creature connected to the Source, Author, Originator. Does “the origin of species” and the “descent of man” connect with this agenda? I don’t think so. Twelve times in these few lines it’s about “I, me, my.”

- B. The parallel verb to “created me” is “given me.” Creaturely existence is gifted existence. My life is something bestowed, donated. God’s biggest gift to me is me, my own existence. Gifted existence is dependent existence.
- C. Another one of Luther’s *bons mots* about creation was “Alles ist Gabe.” Everything’s a gift. So look at the list of the gifts he recites in these few lines: biological, mental, economic, familial, social, protective, preserving.
- D. The last two signal that creaturely existence is conflictive. There’s danger and evil. Life is difficult. Sustenance in the face of opponents is included in the gift package.
- E. It’s all gratis. Freebees! No merit on the part of the receiver to deserve these goodies, to exist at all. Alles ist Gabe from the Source. And that source is personal, parental. A divine fatherly benefactor.
- F. Comes now the kicker: obligation. “For all which it is my duty to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.” The German term translated “duty” here is “*schuldig*,” a much more drastic term. Something like: “For all which I am already way behind in my obligations to thank and to praise, serve and obey.” The gifts of creation—all of them gratis—are gifts that obligate. And who of us is “paid up in full” in our personal creation account? Luther makes this “most certainly true” conclusion perfectly clear in his Large Catechism.

“Much could be said if we were to describe in detail how few people believe this article. We all pass over it, hear it, and recite it, but we neither see nor consider what the words enjoin on us. For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly and not swagger about and brag and boast as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride and greed, pleasure and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord and Creator. Therefore this article would humble and terrify us all [talk about terrorism!] if we believed it. For we sin daily with eyes and ears, hands, body and soul, money and property, and with all that we have. . . . Yet Christians have this advantage, that they acknowledge themselves ‘schuldig’ to serve and obey God for all these things.”

6. Segue to St. Paul

Twice in this Luther citation came the word “acknowledge.” St. Paul uses the same term in his theology of personal creation in the opening paragraphs of Romans. The non-Jewish world, he says, did get signals from their own creaturely existence about the Source, Author, Originator of their lives. Punning—also in Greek—he says: “knowledge” (gnosis) of the creator they did have, but they did not “acknowledge” (no epignosis) the one they knew. Sounds like “schuldig” all over again. And therefore Paul addresses them with words the “schuldig” need to hear: “Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

7. Defective doxology

Defective doxology is the real “problem” in Christian creation theology. Not with the theology, but with us creatures. Needed is some “better news” than the wall-to-wall good news of creaturely gifted existence. For that giftedness obligates—and we are always in arrears with our obligations. Even worse, it’s a catch-22. We can never use tomorrow to make up yesterday’s shortfall, since all of tomorrow is needed to do tomorrow’s thanks and praise, serving and obeying. Needed is some Gift that doesn’t obligate. Even better, a Gift that liberates from the never-to-be-fulfilled obligations of being simultaneously creature and sinner. Needed is the Christ of the creed’s second article, who does all of the above. And that is how Luther “explains” the second article—God’s non-obligating gift who liberates from the dead end of our defective doxology. Result? “That I may be his own, live under him in his regime and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, in the same way as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.” The truth of this Good News trumps the truth of defective doxology. No wonder the NT calls it a “new” creation.

8. Defective hearing.

Beneath defective doxology lies defective hearing. Paul’s analysis in Romans points to a lethal hearing defect. Though they heard the creator’s voice in their own creaturely lives, he says, they didn’t “acknowledge” him with a response appropriate to the message. They didn’t hear any call to repentance, and the consequence was their own destruction. But at least they heard the voice even if they garbled the message. The bane of many of us moderns is not hearing any voice at all calling over to us from creation—even though our microscopes and telescopes have expanded our actual “seeing” of the “mirabilis” to mind-

blowing dimensions. "The heavens declare the glory of God," says the psalmist. And many of us moderns—not only today's disbelieving Darwinists—say "Huh? I didn't hear any message. Surely not a call to repentance." Such deafness to "hearing" the creator's voice, better said, hearing the creator's call, is devolution. Who has the hearing problem—the ones who "hear" such voices or the ones who don't? If the fittest survive, which of these has the fittest ears for survival? Especially for what is needed in today's frazzled world for anyone to survive?

9. Survival of the fittest, a footnote.

In the theology of the second article of the creed, the theology of the cross, it is the unfit who survive. Note who are the survivors in the company Jesus kept: lepers, blind, lame, etc. all of the creature-defectives, all of them doubtless doxological defectives too. In theologies of glory the fittest—most righteous, most powerful, most worthy and wise—survive. What sort of ID is this? How might this theology of "new" creation get into the conversation between EV and ID. That would be a uniquely "Christian" contribution. Here too it doubtless all starts with Paul's word to the knowledge-crowd in Romans: Repentance.

Peace & joy!

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