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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Proper Place of Intelligent Design in the Curriculum

To the Editor:

J. Scott Turner has his heart in the right place ("[Why Can't We Discuss Intelligent Design?](#)," *The Chronicle Review*, January 19). ID should indeed be discussed in universities. ... But it needs to be discussed in context.

Intelligent design is not an honest attempt to understand the natural world. It is not as if someone made a stunning new research finding, published it in a scientific journal, and proposed ID as the explanation. Instead, ID arose as a cynical attempt to come up with a newer, vaguer label for creationism.

Just after the Supreme Court ruled in 1987 that "creation science" was a specific religious view, and teaching it as science in public schools was therefore unconstitutional, creationists working on a textbook decided to delete hundreds of instances of the word "creation" and its cognates and replace them with "intelligent design" terminology. This origin of ID was documented in the 2005 *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* case (the decision is available online at <http://www2.ncseweb.org/kvd>). What scientific movement begins life as a textbook revision?

To discuss intelligent design as if it did not have this historical and legal baggage, as Turner seems to want people to do, is naïve and plays into the hands of the ID public-relations campaign. ...

The official line of ID advocates is that they just want to "teach the controversy" over Darwinism. But the truth is that the vast majority of ID advocates deny the common ancestry of humans and apes in favor of special creation; many of them are agnostic on the age of the earth; and their views emerge not from serious scientific research on these questions, but from the fundamentalist doctrine of reading the Bible as inerrant. ...

Finally, although Turner rightly notes the debatable nature of Richard Dawkins's attempt to make science into an apologetic for atheism, he fails to note that Dawkins's "appearance of design" concept is itself a product of Dawkins's longstanding feud with theism. Dawkins sets up "appearance of design" as the only good argument for God's existence, and then knocks it down with natural selection and concludes there is no God. ...

It is worth pointing out that "appearance of design" is not an indisputable description of biology. In the opinion of many, it is no better than describing the earth as having the "appearance of flatness" — at best, a superficial description based on an extremely restricted view of the data.

By including points like these, even though they do not conform to the intelligent-design movement's

official talking points and its policy of strategic ambiguity on uncomfortable topics, Turner and others would both advance scholarly understanding and minimize the chances of being misunderstood.

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To the Editor:

Writing on intelligent design, J. Scott Turner suggests that "you might believe (as I do) that it is a wrongheaded idea, but it's hard to see how that alone should disqualify it from academic discourse."

He misses the point. So-called intelligent design is very much a part of "academic discourse." ... Intelligent design probably belongs in courses dealing with religion, public policy, contemporary history, and perhaps civics. It does not, however, belong in a science curriculum: Its substance is religion, pure and simple, and that is what the fuss is about.

Well and good to "teach the controversy," which promises to shed interesting light on the impact of religious fundamentalism, church/state separation, the social history of opposition to and acceptance of evolutionary thought, and the sociology of religion and of science. But for evolutionary scientists to teach intelligent design would be almost exactly equivalent to geographers teaching flat-Earth theory, not as an interesting historical sidebar but as a genuine, serious possibility.

Even that would be somewhat less egregious, because at least flat-Earth theory lacks clear theological underpinnings. If, indeed, flat-Earth advocates became especially noisy and influential, so that geographers, airline pilots, and astronomers eventually found themselves discussing the theory — if only to quiet its devotees — this would be interpreted as legitimizing the initial claim, and it would ultimately be a disservice to all concerned.

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To the Editor:

J. Scott Turner feels that intelligent design is a "wrongheaded idea," and of course he is correct. However, I feel compelled to highlight some ways in which his commentary is lacking. ...

The main problem I see is the strong implication that modern evolutionary biologists have a concept of evolution that is pretty much the same as Darwin's. ... I think it is fair to say that someone unfamiliar with the science could read Mr. Turner's piece and get the incorrect impression that modern evolutionary biologists are strict 19th-century Darwin apologists, and that evolutionary biology has not changed an iota since publication of *The Origin of Species*. This is untrue. ...

There has been considerable interest in and study of evolutionary patterns and process. Indeed, Mr. Turner's characterization of evolutionary biology is almost insulting to scholars in the field.

We do think of design, but today we see design as the result mainly of natural selection, and the interaction of selection and the way the world works, both biologically and abiotically. The idea of an intelligent designer has time and again been rejected by science for good reason — based on the preponderance of evidence, combined with the power of well-tested theory — and for decades has resided only in the works of creationists, both overt and covert.

So yes, Mr. Turner, the reaction to the idea of an intelligent designer is a "hue and cry." Why would you expect anything different? ...

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