

more valuable when expressed in the absence of evidence. For a Christian, when science is allowed to be neutral on the subject of God, science can only bolster faith. In contrast, and I imagine without realizing it, ID proponents have become professional Doubting Thomases, funded by Doubting Thomas Institutes. When advocates of ID use the vocabulary of science to argue for God's presence in cellular machinery or in the fossil record, they too poke their fingers through Jesus' hands. In so doing, ID vitiates faith.

Not realizing this, many Christians now believe they are making a stand against evil by supporting religion-infused alternatives to evolution. For them, the fundamental debate is not over which is wrong and which is right, but over which is good and which is bad, and the majority opinion is clear. So if we want to ensure the continued learning of evolution in our schools, we cannot only argue that science and faith can be reconciled; we also have to show that ID actively undermines the basis of Christianity.

Douglas W. Yu

Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Conservation,
School of Biological Sciences, University of
East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK

Leave well alone and stick to teaching what you know

SIR – Your Editorial “Dealing with design” (*Nature* 434, 1053; 2005) is another piece of evidence of the peculiar angst among certain scientists about the ID strategy of a rather robust fraction of the US population. On the basis of some decades of work in this area, I do not believe that your advice to those who feel so threatened is wise, for two reasons.

There are some very skilled experts on the topic of how to deal with different cultures or belief systems. Their advice, from experience, would be: leave well alone. Act like a scientist, confident in your own — always tentative, always open to change — axioms and laws. Read the literature, for God's (or Darwin's) sake. It will prove to you that even graduates of MIT and Harvard do not know simple scientific facts that are irrelevant to their work, such as why the Earth experiences winter and summer, despite having been explicitly taught such facts several times during their education. This amazing ignorance does not affect their performance as scientists. I do not know a single materials scientist or engineer whose technical work would be affected by their beliefs about evolution/ID. My advice: relax. It can do very little harm. Ham-fisted efforts will simply alienate much larger numbers of people from the rest of science.

As to the suggestion that scientists should “offer some constructive thoughts of their own”: beware of the ignorance, nay illiteracy,

“Building a straw man based on natural selection alone makes it easy for opponents to poke holes in evolution” — Michael Lynch

of many scientists on matters of social and political concern. I recommend Huston Smith's book *Why Religion Matters* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002) for advice on how to handle the ID debate.

Rustum Roy

The Pennsylvania State University, 102 MRL,
University Park, Pennsylvania 16802, USA

Intelligent design or intellectual laziness?

SIR – Much of the concern over ID (*Nature* 434, 1053 and 1062–1065; 2005) has focused on veiled attempts to inject religion into public education. Sheltered within the confines of academia, most biologists find it hard to believe that the slain need to be slain again. Those in the trenches — school boards, school biology teachers and their national representatives — often don't know how to respond, in part because they themselves never really achieved a deep understanding of evolutionary biology at college.

However, there is a related and equally disturbing issue: the legitimization of intellectual laziness. Have a problem explaining something? Forget about it: the Designer made it that way. Any place for diversity of opinion as to who/what the Designer is/was? The ID literature makes it very clear that there is no room for scientific discourse on that. Think I'm exaggerating? To get a good idea of what IDers would have the face of science look like, check out the journal *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF.html).

Two factors have facilitated the promotion of ID. First, IDers like to portray evolution as being built entirely on an edifice of darwinian natural selection. This caricature of evolutionary biology is not too surprising. Most molecular, cell and developmental biologists subscribe to the same creed, as do many popular science writers. However, it has long been known that purely selective arguments are inadequate to explain many aspects of biological diversity. Building a straw man based on natural selection alone makes it easy for opponents to poke holes in evolution. But features of the genome, such as genomic parasites or non-coding introns, which aren't so evolutionarily favourable (nor obviously 'intelligent' innovations), can be more readily explained by models that include random genetic drift and mutation as substantial evolutionary forces.

Second, IDers like to portray evolution as

a mere theory. But after a century of close scrutiny, evolutionary theory has passed so many litmus tests of validation that evolution is as much a fact as respiration and digestion.

Less widely appreciated is that evolution has long been the most quantitative field of biology, well grounded in the general principles of transmission genetics. Yet few students at university, and almost none at high school, are exposed to the mathematical underpinnings of evolutionary theory. The teaching of evolution purely as history, with little consideration given to the underlying mechanisms, reinforces the false view that evolution is one of the softer areas of science.

Here is a missed opportunity. Our failure to provide students with the mathematical skills necessary to compete in a technical world is a major concern in the United States. Mathematics becomes more digestible, and even attractive, when students see its immediate application. What better place to start than with the population-genetic theory of evolution, much of which is couched in algebraic terms accessible to school students?

Michael Lynch

Department of Biology, Indiana University,
Bloomington, Indiana 47405, USA

Solidarity with the oppressed flat-Earthers

SIR – I was disturbed by your News Feature “Who has designs on your students' minds?” (*Nature* 434, 1062–1065; 2005), in which the proponents of ID are mostly portrayed as a persecuted minority. They are said to be afraid to reveal their identity and to be frequently censored into silence by anti-democratic scientists and administrators.

Your reporter clearly does not realize that ‘intelligent designers’ are not the only minority bullied into submission by the scientific establishment. The vast majority of flat-Earthers, tea-leaf readers, astrologers, geocentrists and phlogiston theorists cannot publish their studies in respectable journals. It is rumoured that *Nature* has rejected without review a study showing that storks bring babies into the world. I have even heard of a physician who was fired from a university hospital for trying to cure his patients by altering the ratio of blood to yellow bile and phlegm to black bile.

Thanks to your News Feature, I am now convinced that by replacing “small, medium and large” with “tall, grande and venti” — as in my local coffee-shop — the disreputable theory of biblical creationism can be turned into a respectable scientific discipline called ‘intelligent design’.

Dan Graur

Department of Biology and Biochemistry,
University of Houston, Houston,
Texas 77204-5001, USA