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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Making sense of it all

It is always difficult—and often dangerous—to make predictions, but it is just possible that future generations will look back on the year 2004 as the time when public opinion began to shift away from a fashionable agnosticism, buttressed by scientific theories about random selection and the like, towards a recovery of belief in a Creator God. If this happens, the key factor will have been a growing public acceptance of the concept of ‘intelligent design’ as the only really satisfactory way of explaining the meaning of the universe in which we live.

The Bible, of course, has preached this message for millennia. The creation story in Genesis 1–3, however we may wish to interpret it, is based on the belief that the world was made in a rational way and is kept in being by the wish and determination of a supreme mind. Echoes of the same idea permeate the Scriptures, not least in the so-called ‘nature Psalms’, which remain among the classic expositions of this teaching. It was taken for granted by the writers of the New Testament, so much so that the apostle Paul was able to blame the depraved idolatry of the Gentiles on their wilful disobedience to the ‘law of nature’ which was written in their hearts and obvious to anyone who cared to look. Even in the eighteenth century, when there were many intellectuals who were dissatisfied with orthodox Christian doctrine, very few departed from this fundamental conviction, preferring to posit belief in a non-dogmatic ‘supreme being’ who could be worshipped or ignored according to taste.

It was only in the nineteenth century that belief in what we now call ‘the intelligent design of the universe’ was gradually abandoned, as scientists and others came to be persuaded that reality can be fully explained by scientifically-based theories which have no need of a ‘supreme being’ of any kind. The best-known representative of this new wave was Charles Darwin, whose theories of evolution based on natural selection have (with suitable modifications) become the new dogma of modern civilisation. Opposition to neo-Darwinism has surfaced from time to time, but it is seldom given much of an airing nowadays. To remind the scientific establishment that evolution is a

theory, not a fact, is to invite ridicule and rejection, even by those who claim that their minds are open to the facts, wherever they may lead. This is one reason why we must welcome the publication, after more than twenty-years, of David Samuel's doctoral thesis, which reveals the holes in Darwinian theory and mounts an impressive defence of the classic argument from design as expounded by William Paley (*Without Excuse. A Vindication of the Argument from Design*, Ramsgate: Harrison Trust, 2005. £15).

Christians have long waged a losing battle on this front, and it has to be said that their cause has not always been supported with the degree of intellectual rigour shown by Dr. Samuel. In particular, the antics of some 'creationists', especially in the United States, have given the traditional alternative a bad name which it is now very difficult to overcome. One unfortunate result of this is that serious objections to Darwinism have had a hard time getting a hearing. This has been pointed out in a number of obscure academic publications, of course, but only rarely do they get beyond an inner circle to affect wider public attitudes. Yet in 2004 the eighty-one year old Oxford philosopher and atheist, Anthony Flew, announced to a bemused world that he had become a convert to the theory of 'intelligent design' because he could find no better explanation for the phenomena of the universe. He was quick to add that this did not amount to a conversion to biblical Christianity, and the doyens of the scientific establishment have been equally swift to denounce the whole idea of 'intelligent design' as nonsense—old-fashioned fundamentalistic creationism dressed up to look respectable—but after Professor Flew's announcement, the possibility that the world might somehow make sense cannot be so easily dismissed.

In Britain, the minority-interest Channel Four has recently run a series of scientific documentaries devoted to the theme of 'what we still don't know', of which the climax was a full-length investigation of the intelligent design theory. What is so fascinating about this is that the experts who were consulted were forced to concede that the only way to avoid accepting intelligent design is to posit even more extravagant theories, like the existence of several parallel universes which interact with ours in such a way as to keep the world we know finely tuned and balanced. There is no evidence at all for the existence of such universes, but as one interviewee after another confessed, it is the only way they can think of to avoid concluding that there is a supreme intelligence behind observable reality. A bemused presenter found himself asking whether

it is not, in the end, far simpler to posit the existence of God, to which the replies were that it is indeed easier, but that these particular scientists do not want to do that! So in the end, the programme concluded that atheism is a personal choice based on a kind of faith, and that it is not the most straightforward explanation of the facts.

That intelligent design will be opposed by many can be taken for granted. In the United States, where the theory has already entered the school curriculum in some places, it has been denounced as a covert attempt to reintroduce religion into public education and the issue seems set to spend years before the courts as they seek to adjudicate whether or not that is so. Christians do not fool themselves into thinking that belief in intelligent design is the equivalent of conversion to a biblical faith, and there is a long tradition of resistance to what is described as 'natural theology', not least in Reformed circles. The reasons for this are easy to understand, because Christian belief can only be expressed in the context of a personal relationship with God which is established and expressed in terms of conviction of sin, repentance and trust in the shed blood of Christ for salvation. Intelligent design may be an interesting idea, but it cannot substitute for that kind of faith, and to pretend otherwise is to supplant the gospel with a clever but inadequate substitute.

That being said, however, Christian faith demands belief in intelligent design as the only reasonable interpretation of biblical revelation and the only view which coheres with experienced reality. The theory has its difficulties, not least those connected with the existence of evil, pain and suffering, but these problems are ultimately less serious than those which arise if the theory is abandoned. Suffering may be unpleasant, but meaninglessness is ultimately far more intolerable, since it must logically entail the rejection of any concepts whatsoever, including our commonly received understanding of 'suffering'. This does not stop people from adopting such a view, but it is noticeable that even the most dedicated atheist of this type is inconsistent when it comes to the point. Indeed, many intellectuals berate the church and believers for failing to show the degree of moral awareness and social responsibility which they think the condition of our world demands—even though, on their own principles, there is no reason why they should pass so negative a judgement on what they observe. As Christians often point out, it is the residue of biblical faith which gives these apostate intellectuals their moral indignation, not their theories of the origins of the universe.

Once a belief in intelligent design becomes intellectually acceptable, perceptions of the universe are bound to change in some significant ways. For example, it will become much easier to defend the idea that the human body has been designed for a purpose, and in particular, that our sexual organs have been formed for heterosexual, and not for homosexual intercourse. If that idea takes hold in the secular world, we can expect that major changes in attitudes towards homosexuality will follow, and that those who are currently struggling to defend age-old wisdom in this matter (which also happens to be Christian doctrine) will be vindicated in their convictions. Well beyond that, the hedonistic bent of so much of modern culture will collapse, as will the notion that taste in the arts is nothing but a matter of opinion—frequently determined by social prejudice and not by a reasonable devotion to such things as harmony and balance. The consequences for our culture could be far-reaching indeed, and Christians recognise that they favour a biblical world-view, even if they do not prove it absolutely.

For Anglicans in particular, such a shift in popular attitudes may undercut the policies of so many of our bishops and theologians, who seem to be determined to tell a sceptical establishment that their atheism is fully compatible with membership in the church, and that the orthodox believers who refuse to leave it are really no more than a hold-over from some earlier stage of evolution. The demise of unbelief on the episcopal bench may be a great deal to hope for, but if we ever do get to that point, it will at least demonstrate that ‘the survival of the fittest’ has some point to it after all. For only a convinced, orthodox Christian believer is fit to speak for the church in any official capacity. It seems like a lot to expect, but only a few years ago, serious discussion of ‘intelligent design’ among professed unbelievers would have been inconceivable. God remains sovereign in his world, and he will not be left without a witness. If the leaders of the church cannot provide it, then the very stones, Oxford dons included, will cry out and force us back to consider the One who made heaven and earth, and who sent his Son to die so that we who are bound to the latter may be transformed and made fit to live forever in the heaven which surpasses the sky we observe at night, and which will be our home long after the created firmament is finally rolled up and discarded.

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