

Intelligent Design Vs. Metaphysical Naturalism In Louisiana

From Koinonia House (www.khouse.org)

Heads are butting in Louisiana again over a state law to encourage critical thinking in science studies. While all parties agree that critical thinking is a vital skill to teach young people, some want to make sure that Intelligent Design (ID) is not included in the ideas teachers can legally present to children in science class.

In June 2008, Louisiana Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal signed the Louisiana Science Education Act, which states that school authorities “shall allow ... open and objective discussion of scientific theories being studied including, but not limited to, evolution, the origins of life, global warming and human cloning.” The law also includes a clause that expresses neutrality regarding religion.

While the law gives school boards freedom to approve supplemental materials without going through the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the BESE still has the authority to ban certain materials, either preemptively or after receiving a complaint in a local district.

A BESE meeting Tuesday, January 13, brought the arguments from June 2008 back to the table. The BESE’s Student/School Performance and Support Committee met to deal with the specific rules and regulations that would define how Louisiana schools made use of the new law.

During the debates on the legislation last year, opponents of the law argued that it offered too much room for creationists and ID proponents to teach their ideas in public school science classrooms. These complaints seem to have been answered in the proposed BESE rules. The rules contain the same basic language as the state law, but include the statement “materials that teach creationism or intelligent design or that advance the religious belief that a supernatural being created humankind shall be prohibited for use in science classes.”

At the meeting, Barbara Forrest of the Louisiana Science Coalition made clear she did not believe the language went far enough and expressed disappointment that the rules had removed a line in an earlier draft that said, “Religious beliefs shall not be advanced under the guise of encouraging critical thinking.”

On the other hand, Dr. John West, a senior fellow at the ID think tank Discovery Institute, objected to the express rejection of Intelligent Design in the language. He pointing out the state law is silent on ID, and argued that the new language would violate the 1st Amendment.

The Philosophy of Naturalism:

While opponents of Intelligent Design like to classify the ID/Evolution debate as one in which religion attempts to undercut science, the debate is actually deeply grounded in philosophy. The controversy is not science versus religion so much as metaphysical naturalism versus ... something-bigger.

Scientific naturalism is a philosophical position which argues that all phenomena can be explained in terms of natural causes and laws. Many people who are scientific naturalists are also metaphysical naturalists; they believe that nature is all there *is*, and that there is no reality outside of the natural realm.

In today's universities, science students are taught they must be philosophical naturalists in order to be good scientists. If they don't know the answer to the questions "why" or "how" in nature, they need to research until they find a natural explanation. To do otherwise is cheating. For instance, if they get stuck on an answer to the question, "why does the wind blow?" it's not scientific to say, "Well, it blows because God makes it blow." That's giving up. They are taught that a good scientist keeps hunting until a natural explanation is found.

Scientific naturalism is easy to appreciate. It encourages tenacity in scientific research and erases the images of angry gods in volcanoes or thunderclouds. A philosophy of scientific naturalism has helped scientists to push past superstition and find the bacteria that cause disease and the poor farming practices that cause famine. Scientists have been able to show that disease and famine have natural causes that go beyond the anger of local gods.

Yet, a healthy dose of scientific naturalism can become a strangling dose of metaphysical naturalism when it comes to the origins debate. This is an area in which faith and science naturally butt heads. It is one thing to say that a good scientist needs to find the natural explanation for things, and quite another thing to say that nature is all there *is*. Unfortunately, too many scientists in the universities have gotten scientific naturalism confused with metaphysical naturalism.

The Crime Scene Scenario:

The origins debate is a great deal like a crime scene. Let's say a man is found hanging in a warehouse with his mouth gagged and his arms tied behind his back. The philosophical positions of the crime scene investigators determine how they handle the crime scene:

The scientific naturalist says, "We have to use the things we have available in the room in order to determine the cause of this man's death."

The metaphysical naturalist says, "Yes, and only the things *in this room* can be

considered as the cause of his death. We can see no murderer in the room, therefore the man must have killed himself.”

The Intelligent Design advocate says, “We can use the things in this room to argue that somebody murdered this man. We can’t say who, but his tied hands and gagged mouth indicate that he was murdered.”

The creationist says: “We believe this man was murdered, and we know who murdered him because we have his dictated notes.”

The physicist says, “There are more rooms outside this one. We’re busy trying to find a door.”

The person of faith says, “We already found the door.”

Who is correct? It all depends on what is actually outside the room. The Intelligent Design advocate is not necessarily a religionist. He is simply a scientist willing to believe there is more to the universe than what can be found in the warehouse.

The metaphysical naturalist, on the other hand, doesn’t have the scientific upper hand. If there really is no world outside the warehouse, he is certainly in the best position to find the true cause of the man’s death. If the metaphysical naturalist’s philosophy is wrong, though, he is going to spend his life fruitlessly trying to prove that a murdered man killed himself.

The Intelligent Design advocates and the naturalists are facing off again in Louisiana. As the world watches them hammer at each other, it would be wise to recognize the philosophical positions of both sides of the debate.
