Counterpoint: Intelligent Design Means "Creationism" and Does Not Belong in Public School Science Classes

Thesis: Intelligent Design is another term for Creationism--a subject suitable for discussion in philosophy or religion classes but not as part of a "science" curriculum in public schools.

Summary: "Intelligent Design" is a thinly disguised version of Creationism--the Biblical story in Genesis of how mankind and the rest of the world came about at the behest of God. Because it is not a theory based on repeated observations, it does not qualify as "science." If it belongs in any classroom, it is in a philosophy or religious studies setting, not science.

Introduction

From the mid-1500s, a new era dawned in the history of human thought--the Scientific Revolution. Many of its principal figures are household names--Nicholaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Galileo Galilei (1564--1642), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727) to name just three.

At the root of this revolution were not the specific ideas or discoveries of these scientists and others like them, but rather the idea that knowledge of natural phenomena should be acquired from repeated observation. It is impossible to think of Copernicus or Galileo--authors of the idea that the sun is at the center of the solar system, rather than the earth--without telescopes. Science is not the result of observation; it is the process of disciplined observation. It is a mindset that says, at bottom, "Show me."

"Show me" includes recording observations, undertaking experiments, drawing conclusions and publishing them, thereby allowing others to make their own observations, undertake their own experiments, and test whether the first scientist's conclusions or explanations fit those
observations. Scientific explanations are known as "theories," a particular use of this word that implies a coherent explanation--not a set of guesses based purely on speculation.

From the beginning of the Scientific Revolution this approach raised objections from religious authorities. Galileo was famously hauled before the Inquisition and asked how he could assert that the sun was at the center of the solar system when the Bible says otherwise. The accusation against Galileo was heresy, meaning challenging the explanation accepted by religion. At the heart of religion lies a basic and fundamental explanation of natural phenomena--they are the result of act(s) of one God (or several gods in the case of polytheistic religions).

**Explanations of What vs. Why**
The scientific method is primarily focused on "what is happening," rather than "why." Take, for example, the tsunami--a huge wave that moves across great distances of ocean and smashes ashore suddenly, causing destructive flooding. The scientific explanation is that an underwater earthquake causes the bottom of the sea to shift, suddenly unbalancing the thousands of feet of ocean water above; a tsunami is, in effect, like jiggling a large container filled with liquid.

Related scientific explanations are offered for earthquakes--the earth's surface is floating above a molten core. These explanations do not address the question of why a particular person is walking on a particular beach at a particular moment and is carried to death by the tsunami. Does that person's death have an explanation? Is life really just a matter of chance, or of luck? Are we nothing but dice tumbling through life?

**Questions and Answers**
For many people, scientific explanations fail to get to the root of existence--why did the earth shift just now, just on the day when someone I love was walking the beach in Indonesia and swept away by the wave? Because of an underwater earthquake? But why did the earthquake take place on this particular day? And so forth.

And herein lies the principal difference between science and religion: science can explain what happened, but does not always supply a satisfying explanation for the reason. It fails to confirm a purpose behind events rather than pure chance.

Religion, on the other hand, offers such an explanation: the will of God. If everything that exists is the result of God's will--the essence of the story of creation in Genesis--then surely subsequent events can also be explained by God's will. We as individuals can influence what happens by conforming to God's laws, as taught by our religion.

This difference in viewpoints clashes most particularly on the subject of the origins of human beings. Predominant Western religions have long taught that God created Adam and Eve on a single day. But in the mid-19th century, Charles Darwin offered an alternative explanation: animals have successfully adapted to circumstances and have changed biologically ("evolved") gradually over millions of years largely by chance; humans and apes (notably chimpanzees) share a common ancestor after whom chance resulted in changes observable today in the differences between chimpanzees and humans.

A century after Darwin, Francis Crick and James Watson, working at Cambridge University in England in the 1950s, and English chemist Rosalind Elise Franklin working separately, discovered a further explanation for evolution: DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), the substance in living cells that determines the nature of those cells. Further study showed that the DNA of simians and humans is mostly the same, making it easier to see how minor changes in the DNA of ancient ancestors led to the "evolution" of humans from apes.

But for some believers in religion, this idea strikes at a basic tenet of their beliefs: that mankind was created by God in God's own image. And since God had created the earth, the notion that a chance change in a monkey's DNA resulted in human beings directly contradicts the story presented in Genesis, much less the belief that God continues to overlook the behavior of human beings in a way that is different than, say, God's supervision of behavior by "animals" (e.g. chimpanzees).

**Defending Religion**
Offering the story of Genesis in public school science classes seemed to many to violate the
Constitutional separation of church and state by seeming to endorse the teaching of the Bible. It was in response to this problem that an alternative explanation emerged, called "Intelligent Design." This idea holds that some superior force--an Intelligent Designer (though not necessarily named Jehovah or Yaweh or God or Allah)--lies behind the complex and interlocking phenomena of the natural world.

Although advocates of Intelligent Design insist that it is "scientific," in truth it leads nowhere. That is, either one believes it or one doesn't. There is really no way to explore further, to develop proof or disproof, or point to consistent phenomena.

On the other hand, the very concept of Intelligent Design posits an Intelligent Designer--not only a source of the patterns of life we observe, but an intelligent source. To suggest that this is not simply another name for God, or Allah, is to obscure the point with word games. "Intelligent Design" and "Creationism" may have a role in classrooms studying philosophy, or the history of religion--but not in science classrooms.

**Ponder This**

1. Many religious beliefs recorded in the Bible have been around for at least two thousand years; does this longevity suggest their underlying truth, or does it demonstrate a need to re-examine them after such a long period?
2. Doesn't Galileo's theory that the sun is at the center of the solar system literally depend on your standpoint? Standing on the sun, it would appear that the earth is circling around once a year; standing on earth, it looks like the sun is moving across the sky. Is one viewpoint "right" and the other "wrong"--or is it a question of one's point of view?
3. Does the term "scientific" automatically exclude belief in the creation stories inherent in many religions?
4. If ID should be excluded from biology classes on grounds it might coincide with religious ideas, should the history of religion's impact on society be excluded from history classes?

**Bibliography**

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