

Feature Article: DS700

Science and Religion 2002: A Response to *Skeptical Inquirer*

INTRODUCTION

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SYNOPSIS

At the Christian Research Institute, we have long subscribed to the *Skeptical Inquirer* (*SI*), published by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). *SI* defines itself as “the magazine for science and reason,” and it regularly features helpful articles debunking New Age/occult claims for paranormal phenomena, dubious health care practices, and a variety of superstitious and improbable beliefs. To a large extent, it truly is a magazine supporting science and reason, and to that extent we appreciate it.

SI, however, is not merely concerned with promoting sound science and healthy skepticism of unsubstantiated claims. It is a magazine with a larger mission; indeed, its founder, Paul Kurtz, could be considered the apostle Paul of modern secular humanism. The author of *Humanist Manifesto II* and 34 other books, Kurtz is also the founder of the magazine *Free Inquiry*, the publishing house Prometheus Books, and other leading atheist/freethought/secular humanist endeavors. The mission of *SI*/CSICOP, along with those other projects, clearly involves promoting a worldview — materialistic naturalism — that itself cannot be proven scientifically or rationally.

SI publishes authors of varying perspectives, but it is inconceivable that any of them would ever conclude that the best explanation for a given phenomenon is supernatural. Traditional creationism, which invokes a supernatural Creator as an explanation for the *origin* of the universe (but not for any subsequent natural phenomena that science observes), is therefore automatically high on their list of “pseudosciences” that need to be debunked.

To *SI*, attributing the universe to a supernatural Creator is as much a threat to the scientific method as would be attributing the occurrence of thunder to the Norse god Thor. It seemingly escapes them that the origin of the universe is in a different category than anything else that science considers.¹ The problem here is a matter of worldview bias: creationism is disqualified at the starting gate even though proper science in no way disproves it and enough evidence can be summoned in support of it to at least warrant consideration.

Given *SI*'s commitment to philosophical naturalism, the reason for this antagonism to creationism is not difficult to discern. Their atheistic worldview² depends on the theory of evolution to have any viability at all — *much more so* than theism depends on special creation. If creationists can be accused of having special, nonscientific interests in seeing the evidence for creation discussed in the schools, then atheists certainly can equally be accused of having special, nonscientific interests in seeing such evidence

excluded. Philosophical naturalists have an obvious interest in convincing the scientific community, the courts, and the public that science and evolution are inseparable and that any setbacks for the influence of evolutionary theory would be setbacks for science itself.³ This is the message conveyed in *SI* and other freethought publications, *ad infinitum, ad nauseum*.

After creationism suffered critical court defeats in the 1980s,⁴ it appeared that the dominance of Darwinian evolution in science, the schools, and American culture at large was assured. Perhaps a little too complacent in their victory, CSICOP and other gatekeepers of the Citadel of Secularized Society failed to take sufficient notice of the emergence of an intellectually robust new variety of creationism, the intelligent design (ID) movement.⁵ In the 1990s Phillip Johnson, William Dembski, Michael Behe, and other respectable scholars and scientists were publishing formidable arguments for intelligent design and against Darwinian evolution, and the neo-Darwinian community was doing little to answer them. Others, however, were paying attention, and the ID movement gained a respectability and hearing outside of evangelical Christian circles that traditional creationism had failed to achieve. It currently appears as though place for discussing ID will be made in the Ohio school system, and — given the significant differences between traditional creationism and ID — it is not at all certain that such a provision would be overturned in the courts.

Awakening at last to the challenge confronting them, Darwin's defenders have been scrambling to launch a counteroffensive. One example of this is the Fall 2001 "special issue" of *SI*, titled "Science and Religion 2001." An impressive line-up of scientists and scholars tackled a range of issues on the relationship of religion to science, with several articles focused on creationism and ID.

Being conversant with ID literature and persuaded by its arguments, I was curious to see how much of a challenge to ID this distinguished group of evolutionists could muster. Not much, it turned out. Many of the arguments presented were frankly lame, and few presented a challenge even to me, a nonscientist; yet, I could envision the CSICOP community patting themselves on their backs for having finally answered and dispensed with the ID movement. In their dreams! Sweeping dismissals of closely reasoned arguments as pseudoscience poppycock accompanied by little substantive interaction with the arguments themselves do not a rebuttal make, no matter how respectable the person doing the dismissing may be.

It occurred to me that we publish our articles controverting evolution while *SI* publishes theirs controverting creation, but neither side benefits from interaction with the other. Both of our constituencies think the other side has been answered; but have they? Why shouldn't the *Christian Research Journal* engage the *Skeptical Inquirer* by holding their feet to the fire for the things they publish? Perhaps this could lead to further exchange and debate between the proponents and critics of ID,⁶ resulting in a sharpening or rethinking of positions that can only advance the cause of science, with the adherents of both schools of thought able to see the results.

As a way to get the ball rolling, I invited three capable ID thinkers — one a philosopher, another a mathematician-philosopher, and the third a philosopher with extensive education in physics — to respond to the three articles in the "Science and Religion 2001" issue I thought were the most relevant and substantive: Matt Young's "Science and Religion in an Impersonal universe," Massimo Pigliucci's "Design Yes, Intelligent No," and Steven Weinberg's "A Designer Universe?" Here, then, is our modest article-length response to an entire issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*. May the camp with the most truth on its side win! Isn't that — or shouldn't it be — what science is all about?

NOTES

1. By this I mean the quest for origins inescapably involves ultimate questions that are not readily or necessarily answered by science and must be addressed from the perspective of religion or philosophy. Science can be useful, however, as one method of testing the veridicality (coherence with reality) of beliefs derived from these nonscientific sources.
2. This is not to suggest that everyone involved with *SI* is an atheist; some no doubt are merely skeptics, at least concerning the paranormal and probably also concerning God. Kurtz, however, is an avowed atheist, and atheism is evident in many of *SI*'s editorial decisions.

3. By evolution I am here referring to *macroevolution*: the unproven development of all of life from one single-celled organism. I am not referring to *microevolution*: the proven adaptation of species to changes in their environment for the purpose of survival. Creationists accept the latter. Evolutionists often equivocate by arguing that rejection of evolution would throw back the biological sciences, but it is an understanding of microevolution that has produced tangible advances in science, not macroevolution.
4. See Paul A. Nelson, "Life in the Big Tent: Traditional Creationism and the Intelligent Design Community," *Christian Research Journal* 24, 4 (2002): 20–25, 41–44.
5. Ibid.
6. There has been some debate already (e.g., between Massimo Pigliucci and William Dembski), but not nearly enough.