Bad science, bad theology

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PUT ASIDE the question of whether "intelligent design," the latest alternative to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, is good science. The more interesting question is whether it is good theology.

ID argues, supposedly on purely scientific grounds, that the complexity of life, especially at the cellular level, points to an Intelligent Designer. It's adherents won't call that designer God, but the conventional wisdom is that Christians can only be pleased if ID gains traction. But that's not necessarily so, though ID certainly has its Christian cheerleaders, and they aren't all fundamentalists.

Last month, for example, Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Vienna, published an Op-Ed article in the New York Times assailing "neo-Darwinism" and sounding a lot like a supporter of ID.

"The Catholic Church," he wrote, "while leaving to science many details about the history of life on Earth, proclaims that by the light of reason the human intellect can readily and clearly discern purpose and design in the natural world."

Schoenborn conceded that Pope John Paul II said in 1996 that evolution was "more than just a hypothesis" (a statement science writer Michael Shermer once paraphrased as "evolution happened — deal with it"). But the cardinal also argued that this "rather vague and unimportant" papal pronouncement must be read in light of John Paul's comment 11 years earlier that "the evolution of living beings … presents an internal finality which arouses admiration [and which] obliges one to suppose a Mind which is its inventor, its creator."

But is acceptance of ID (and rejection of Darwinism) really required by the basic belief contained in the Apostles' Creed?: "I believe in God … creator of Heaven and Earth"? It all depends, as Bill Clinton might say if he were a theologian, on what the definition of "creator" is.

Long before Darwin, Christian thinkers struggled with the paradox that portraying God as "maker of heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible" (in the words of another creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan) could give the Deity *less* than his due.

The problem, Protestant theologian Langdon Gilkey explained in his 1965 book "Maker of Heaven and Earth," is that a "maker" could be a mere craftsman, shaping raw material, rather than a truly omnipotent God. The solution, was to emphasize that God created *ex nihilo*, "from nothing."

"In the Christian doctrine of creation," Gilkey wrote, "God is the source of all and creates out of nothing. Thus the Christian idea, far from merely representing a primitive anthropomorphic projection of human art upon the cosmos, systematically repudiates all direct analogy from human art." God instead is the "transcendent source of all existence."

Moreover, Gilkey wrote, human beings discover God the creator "not from a careful scientific or metaphysical analysis of the general experience of nature and of finite existence, but rather from the

illumination that comes from special encounters with God in revelatory experiences."

And that points to a different problem with a naive embrace by the church of intelligent design. Christian faith cannot be produced by a reflection on scientific knowledge or supposed gaps in that knowledge.

The Catholic theologian Luke Timothy Johnson makes a similar point. "The Christian confession of God as creator," he writes in "The Creed," "is not theory about how things came to be, but a perception of how everything is still and is always coming into being.

"God's self-disclosure in creation, therefore, is not like the traces of the watchmaker in his watch. God is revealed in the world first of all not through the 'whatness' of things but through the 'isness' of things. That anything exists at all is the primordial mystery that points us to God."

Johnson sees this vision of creation as being "entirely compatible with theories of evolution." He adds: "The theories of the natural and biological sciences address, and can only address, the interconnecting causes of beings that have been or are now already in existence. They cannot account for existence itself."

And although Johnson doesn't refer specifically to intelligent design, he calls its close relative, creationism, a "failed enterprise lacking … intellectual integrity."

For atheists, the distinction between these accounts of the doctrine of creation and intelligent design might seem a distinction without a difference. After all, they both see a God of some sort behind or under (pick your metaphor) physical reality. Yet for many Christians, it is not only possible but necessary to reject the idea of God as the watchmaker, the mere Intelligent Designer, who walks away from his work.