

Why God's in a class by himself

By Michael Shermer

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INTELLIGENT DESIGN creationism resurfaced in the news last week after President Bush's remarks were (mis)taken by IDers to be a solid endorsement for the teaching of ID in public school science classrooms. (Bush's science advisor, John H. Marburger III, said that "evolution is the cornerstone of modern biology" and "intelligent design is not a scientific concept.")

One magazine reporter asked for my opinion about whether one can believe in God and the theory of evolution.

I replied that, empirically speaking, yes, you can — the proof being that 40% of American scientists profess a belief in God and also accept the theory of evolution, not to mention that most of the world's 1 billion Catholics believe in God and accept the theory of evolution. But then this reporter wanted to know if it is logically consistent to believe in God and the theory of evolution. That is, does the theory of evolution — if carried out to its logical conclusion — preclude belief in God? This is a different question. Here is my answer.

You can believe in God and evolution as long as you keep the two in separate, logic-tight compartments. Belief in God depends on religious faith. Belief in evolution depends on empirical evidence.

This is the fundamental difference between religion and science. If you attempt to reconcile religion and science on questions about nature and the universe, and if you push the science to its logical conclusion, you will end up naturalizing the deity because for any question about nature — the origins of the universe, life, humans, whatever — if your answer is "God did it," a scientist will ask: "How did God do it? What forces did God use? What forms of matter and energy were employed in the creation process?" and so forth. The end result of this inquiry can only be natural explanations for all natural phenomena. What place, then, for God?

One could argue that God is the laws and forces of nature, which is logically acceptable, but this is pantheism and not the type of personal God to which most people profess belief.

One could also argue that God created the universe and life using the laws and forces of nature as his tools, which is also logically fine, but it leaves us with additional scientific questions: Which laws and forces were used to create specific natural phenomena? How did God create the laws and forces of nature? A scientist would be curious to know God's recipe for, say, gravity or for a universe or a cell. For that matter, it is a legitimate scientific question to ask what made God, and how was God created? How do you make an omniscient being?

Finally, one could argue that God is outside of nature and therefore needs no explanation. This is also logically consistent, but by definition it means that the God question is outside of science, and therefore religion and science are separate and incompatible.

Bottom line: Teach science in science classes and religion in religion classes.
